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Too many governments and employers have left migrant workers stranded in their own countries with impunity. Under international human rights law governments are obliged to take steps to prevent threats to public health and to provide medical care for those that need it, yet in many parts of the world migrant workers are left in limbo without jobs, income and access to health.

### **Increased vulnerability of migrant workers**

Covid-19 has magnified and exacerbated the vulnerability of migrant workers. Abrupt redundancies in the tourism, hospitality and construction left many people jobless and stranded in host countries, while their families were cut off from the basic income coming from their remittances. Many are now being chased by loan sharks for the money they borrowed to pay recruitment fees for the job abroad. While many migrants work in the frontlines to fight the pandemic in health and care, services, the gig economy and agriculture and ensure that essential commodities and services can continue to be delivered to us all, they are often excluded from government income, employment, health and social protection programmes in response to the crisis. Despite their contribution to keep the backbone of our global economy, they are still confronted with structural discrimination, including poor living and working conditions.

Whether they have reached their home or are along migration routes returnee migrant workers in countries that lack the capacity to protect them, are stigmatised with the risk of importing diseases due to conditions.

### **Jobless and stranded**

Migrant workers are stuck in all parts of the world since the pandemic has disrupted international travel. From **Thailand**, where migrant workers from **Myanmar** and **Cambodia** are left unemployed without access to government aid due to their informal status and not being registered under the social security system and unable to go home due to a strict border closure, to the **Gulf states** where **Indian** and **Pakistani** workers stranded with no help from their governments join around 127,000 **Nepali** stuck after losing their jobs and being denied the right to return home by Nepali government. Countries face huge challenges to keep people safe during the pandemic, but the response cannot be to deny citizens the right to return home.

In **Brazil** where the denialism of President Jair Bolsonaro has caused a spike in Covid-19 cases and the collapse of the Brazilian health system, an estimated 500,000 migrant workers from **Paraguay** and **Bolivia** in garment and textile industry have lost their jobs and are desperately seeking a way home. While the government of Paraguay imposed a strict rule on quarantine and closed its borders since 24<sup>th</sup> of March in order to protect its under resourced and weak public health system, it has left many returnee migrant workers stuck in dismal quarantine facilities after a long and perilous journey home. The long wait to enter the country border forced thousands of returnee migrants to sleep on sidewalks for several nights.

At sea, governments and companies are equally refusing to take up any responsibility. As an example, in **Europe**, 320 sailors from **Samoa** are stranded on board cruise ships in the Mediterranean and kept in quarantine before repatriation. Despite a call by the International Transport Federation on their behalf to the Samoan government, the sailors are still not be allowed to return home due to border closure as Covid-19 precautions. The ITF with the support of the ITUC have petitioned governments, the Human Rights Council even the UN to accept responsibility for managing repatriation.

In **Russia**, an estimated 2.4 million migrant workers from **Central Asia** have lost their jobs and wanted to return home but are stuck as no airlines are operating due to border closures.

## **Safe and voluntary return**

While origin countries are refusing return, destination country government responses are focusing on the speedy repatriation of migrant workers. In the absence of decent work at home or full payment of wages in their destination, however, the option of returning home is, unlikely to be the wish of most migrant workers who instead are hoping to stay in destination countries, keep their jobs and make headway towards financial security and better livelihood for their family. In the absence of clear repatriation procedures and identified responsibilities even voluntary return often violates migrant workers' rights. Obtaining personal documents like passport is a challenge when all too many employers and recruiters continue to keep them confiscated. There are the costs that workers are often forced to pay for airline tickets, the Covid-19 test before leaving the host country and then they may face 14 days of compulsory quarantine in their home countries. Some countries are bluntly refusing migrant workers the right to return home hiding behind the risk of possible virus transmission.

The lack of governance, international cooperation and solidarity with shared responsibility is hitting migrant workers ruthlessly. The contemporary treatment of migrant workers and certainly during the Covid-19 crisis, shames us all. There is an even more stark lack of humanity as then pandemic has exposed just how many migrant workers are frontline workers in health, care, transport and services.

A greater international solidarity is urgent to prevent escalation. Covid-19 shows how essential it is for governments to implement the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and to uphold human rights and equal treatment for all migrants, regardless of their migratory status.

Governments should urgently develop responses in line with the [guidance note](#) on the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the human rights of migrants by UN Committee on Migrant Workers (CMW) and the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants.

The ITUC is supporting the call by UN human rights experts to governments to suspend enforced return and in relation to the issue of unpaid wages, we support the appeal for a free of cost, expedited, accessible and efficient Transitional Justice Mechanism that will address grievances including wage claims and labour disputes of repatriated workers who have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic.

The [2016 ILO General Principles and Operational Guidelines for Fair Recruitment](#) and the subsequent definition of what constitute recruitment costs to be borne by the employer go a long way in clarifying responsibilities of governments, employers and labour recruiters and first and foremost confirm that a recruitment process for employment abroad includes the facilitation of voluntary return to the country of origin. In addition, they confirm that enterprises, agencies and international assistance programmes operating in conflict and crisis situations are not contributing to human rights abuses. Corporations must be held to account to respect human rights when recruiting workers, including through human rights due diligence assessments of recruitment procedures, and address adverse human rights impacts with which they are involved.

## **Protection of returning migrants**

Returned migrants face financial hardship as they suffer disproportionately from already high levels of unemployment due to Covid-19. However, the skills that returnees gained in destination countries will benefit their own nations and recognition of those skills is a key lever for reintegration in national labour markets in origin country. Governments have to focus more on returnee migrant workers and their inclusion in recovery plans to build stronger resilience in their economies and ensure utilisation of welfare funds contributed by migrant workers for their benefit. Unions are calling governments to talk to unions to ensure social dialogue can develop responses that leave no one behind as priority. As the plight of stranded migrant workers painfully illustrates, the social contract is broken. It can only be renewed through meaningful social dialogue in order to guarantee jobs, living wages, health and safety and social protection for all. Migrant workers hold up many economies that would be at risk without

their contribution and through remittances their own countries. Those who welcome them first will benefit the most as we move from crisis to a resilient recovery.

