

**17<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL SOUTH EAST ASIA  
RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT LEADERSHIP MEETING**

*14-15 October 2020*

**Background Note  
The socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on Migrants and Displaced People**

**Background**

Millions of migrants – including migrant workers, asylum seekers and refugees - are living, working and moving across the South East Asia region. Many of these migrants and refugees are undocumented and/or stateless.

South East Asian migrants are also living and working in other regions, including large numbers in the Middle East and the Gulf. The latest estimate is that nearly 40% of all migrants across the globe come from countries in the Asia Pacific region and that almost half (49.4%) of all international migrants in the Asia Pacific region are women.<sup>1</sup>

The Leaders of Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies - including South East Asian leaders - have made global and regional commitments to increase our collective assistance and protection to migrants, on a purely humanitarian basis and irrespective of legal status or category. These include commitments in the **IFRC Global Strategy on Migration** and the **Manila Call for Action in a Fast-Changing World**. The importance of addressing the humanitarian needs of migrants has been identified as one of the five humanitarian priorities all National Societies and the IFRC must address over the next decade, as captured in **Strategy 2030**.

**COVID-19, Migrants and Displaced People**

Since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, migrants and refugees have been disproportionately at risk and vulnerable. These risks relate to health, socio-economic, and protection concerns.

Health

Migrants and refugees in South East Asia and elsewhere are disproportionately at risk of contracting COVID-19 for various reasons including, for example:

- Living in **cramped housing**, with poor hygiene and water and sanitation.
- Facing **obstacles in accessing affordable health care**, especially those migrants and refugees who are undocumented and/or stateless. In some countries, migrants fear being reported to the authorities and arrested, detained and possibly deported if they do present for testing or treatment.
- Simply **not knowing how or where to obtain support**, due to linguistic and/or cultural barriers.

In recognition of these disproportionate risks, many South East Asian National Societies have taken action to respond the humanitarian needs of migrants.

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<sup>1</sup> [UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific \(2017\), \*Towards Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in the Asia Pacific Region: Challenges and Opportunities\*](#).

The **Thai Red Cross Society** has provided migrant workers with personal protective equipment (reusable cloth face masks and alcohol gel), information in migrants' own languages about risk awareness and disease prevention, and relief kits including food and personal hygiene items to those under quarantine. This project aims to reach nearly 400,000 people and is a collaborative effort led by the Thai Red Cross, involving local NGOs and UNICEF, and supported by the ICRC and the IFRC.

Through a partnership with the Migrant Workers' Centre and the Centre for Domestic Employees, the **Singapore Red Cross** distributed awareness materials on reducing the risk of COVID-19 in languages commonly spoken by migrant groups in Singapore, including information on how migrant domestic workers could protect themselves and the households in which they are living and working.

The **Philippine Red Cross** updated its 'Virtual Volunteer' web-based application with up-to-date information about COVID-19, including the location of quarantine facilities, government advisories and contact details of relevant organisations and agencies, to support migrant workers while they are abroad and upon their return to the Philippines.

### **Socio-economic impacts**

The social and economic impacts of COVID-19 are being felt at every level - by individuals, families and communities and at the national, regional and global levels.

- COVID-19 has generated a worrying increase in **stigmatisation of and discrimination towards migrants**, who are, in some contexts, perceived as being the cause of outbreaks. Such stigma is leading to social isolation and preventing migrants from seeking assistance, compromising individual safety and well-being, as well as public health efforts to control the pandemic.
- Migrants who are quarantined and/or affected by border closures or are unable to return home, may **lose contact with family members and community support networks**.
- **Psycho-social support needs** have increased due to COVID-19. Mental health issues are created and exacerbated by the pandemic due to heightened feelings of fear, uncertainty and isolation, as well as social stigma towards migrants, including those returning back to their country of origin after time abroad, and the remains of deceased migrants.
- In the face of COVID-19, maintaining an **adequate standard of living** has become even more precarious for migrants who are often the first to lose their jobs and incomes and the last to receive assistance. This can increase risks of exploitation and abuse. Many migrants are unable to meet their most basic needs of food, shelter and access to healthcare and hygiene facilities - all necessary to ensure their safety, dignity and well-being and to prevent COVID-19 transmission – let alone support families back home. The **loss of remittances** has resulted in significant social and economic impacts, leaving communities and economies previously heavily reliant on remittances with uncertain prospects for the future.

According to a major new [report](#) published by IFRC and partners, and based on community perception surveys in four Asian countries, nearly one in two people blame migrants for spreading COVID-19. **Addressing stigma and xenophobia, and promoting social cohesion** is a priority for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in our COVID-19 response.

The **Myanmar Red Cross Society** (MRCS) provides psycho-social support (PSS) to returning migrants undergoing quarantine in state facilities. PSS activities are conducted by telephone and through in-person counselling, ensuring that specific physical distancing measures are adhered to. MRCS also combats misinformation, rumours and social stigma towards returning migrants by disseminating accurate and trustworthy community messages.

In recognition of the economic impacts of COVID-19 on local communities previously dependent on remittances from migrant workers, cash has been distributed to households of migrant workers undergoing quarantine after returning to Myanmar.

### **What more can National Societies do?**

The IFRC stands ready to support National Societies further reinforce their efforts through strengthening capacity on Migration.

**Peer to peer exchange and learning** between sister National Societies on challenges and successes in COVID-19 preparedness and response is one of the key strengths of our network at the sub-regional, regional and global levels. Peer support is available from sister National Societies through the **Asia Pacific Migration Network (APMN)**.

A baseline understanding of humanitarian needs in the context of migration and displacement has significantly strengthened the COVID-19 preparedness and response efforts of those National Societies which have already conducted **national needs assessments**, such as the **Singapore Red Cross** and the **Myanmar Red Cross Society**.

Before embarking on a project to reach migrant workers in Thailand, the **Thai Red Cross Society** undertook a **rapid needs assessment** through consultation with a wide range of civil society, UN, non-governmental and government stakeholders.

Based on an understanding of needs, National Societies may then integrate migrants and displaced people into emergency preparedness and response and community programming, and in some cases develop specific projects. For example, **Palang Merah Indonesia** (the Indonesian Red Cross) and the **Philippine Red Cross** have both recently developed specific emergency response operations for population movements.

Echoing the call made by the Director of the WHO, Tedros Ghebreyesus that “*no one is safe until everyone is safe*”, Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies may also engage in **humanitarian dialogue** with authorities to advocate that migrants and refugees are included in national COVID-19 response plans, and support the authorities to identify and understand migrants’ needs and provide appropriate care.

### **2020 South East Asia Leaders’ Meeting**

The 2020 South East Asia Leaders’ Meeting provides a platform to collectively discuss realising these commitments and meeting the targets of the Manila Call for Action. It also presents an occasion for exchange and learning, analysis and cooperation, between Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies in South East Asia in the context of migration and displacement.