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*Global Health Security:
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

In Limbo in ASEAN: Pandemic and Irregular Migration

By S. Nanthini

SYNOPSIS

COVID-19 has led to stricter border control measures the world over. This has had a particularly harsh impact on irregular migrants. As COVID-19 heightens their vulnerability, even as ASEAN meets in summit this week, this is an opportunity for ASEAN member states to support all those found within their borders.

COMMENTARY

AS OF 11 June 2020, no less than [220 countries, territories or areas have imposed travel restrictions](#) including closing their borders as part of their attempts to “flatten the curve”. As such, the COVID-19 global outbreak has further limited freedom of movement leading to irregular migrants, particularly those in transit, being stranded all over the world in border areas.

With over [662,000 recorded international migrants in Southeast Asia in 2019](#) and a little over 1/3 of whom are refugees, this poses a serious issue for Southeast Asia. Already vulnerable due to their undocumented legal status, lack of valid travel documents and having crossed international borders by irregular means, irregular migrants have been particularly hard hit by the COVID-19 outbreak. This vulnerability is further heightened by countries heavily tightening their border control measures, trapping them in limbo indefinitely.

2020 ‘Boat People’ Crisis?

Since the implementation of tightened border control and limits on freedom of movement over COVID-19 in the region, there has been an increase in countries denying entry to abandoned ships carrying Rohingya refugees, sparking concerns about [a possible repeat of the 2015 'boat people' crisis](#).

The lack of a coordinated response to the then-crisis led most of the countries involved to agree to the [2016 Bali Declaration](#), which outlined the way forward in preventing another similar crisis. However, despite the recent meeting of the Bali Process' Task Force on Planning and Preparedness, during which countries including Indonesia and Malaysia emphasised the importance of "[saving lives at sea and not endangering the life and safety of persons in responding to irregular maritime migration](#)", this seems to have been disregarded in the face of COVID-19.

Although Malaysia has accepted boats in the past, albeit on an ad-hoc basis, their stance toughened in recent months. This is highlighted by the recent [intensification of maritime surveillance operations](#) by the Royal Malaysian Navy to prevent and turn away other similar excursions into Malaysian waters.

While Bangladesh had at first continued to rescue refugees from boats that were found in international waters after being rejected by Malaysia and Thailand, [they have since refused to do so](#) as cases of COVID-19 in Bangladesh continue to climb.

Stretched Resources

Services dealing with migration, both governmental and non-governmental, all over the world are currently heavily stretched in terms of money, manpower and facilities.

For example, when Thailand announced measures to temporarily close their land borders in March, thousands of jobless migrant workers streamed over the borders to their homes. However, for some of these jobless migrant workers, home refers to the Thai-Myanmar border camps.

The current [border control measures have limited their freedom of movement across the border](#) and have left them unable to travel for informal labour. This has eroded their income and left them almost entirely dependent on external humanitarian assistance. With [over 90,000 people in nine border camps along the Thai-Myanmar border](#), resources are particularly stretched at this time.

While the UNHCR and the Thai ministry of public health have been coordinating with NGOs on the ground, [only 40% of funding requirements have been met](#). As such, even current strategies such as dealing with infection prevention and food, that have been put into place may not be enough to last, particularly with the monsoon season and its associated dangers looming.

Although there have been no COVID-19 cases reported in the camps as of 22 May 2020, testing capabilities in these camps vary, with some camps having no referral and/or testing facilities.

ASEAN's Role

This week's virtual [ASEAN Summit in Vietnam](#) may be an opportunity for the regional grouping to take another look at its migration policies. While not all ASEAN member states are parties to the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, [the right to seek asylum is nonetheless guaranteed under Article 16 of the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration](#).

As [Indonesia's representative to the ASEAN Intergovernmental Human Rights Commission](#) has pointed out, ASEAN has already established COVID-19 health protocols requiring people entering the country to undergo a 14-day quarantine in designated places.

As such, countries in the region should use these protocols in current dealings with irregular migrants such as the Rohingya refugees, rather than leaving them in limbo. ASEAN could also go one step further and consider the development of an ASEAN-wide standard for asylum policies.

Moreover, with both developing and developed countries needing humanitarian assistance during this period, resources on the ground are becoming increasingly stretched.

Self-Sufficiency Policy for Migrants?

As such, ASEAN member states should also look at developing policies which increase self-sufficiency and self-reliance among migrants, including placing a moratorium on job restrictions during this period, allowing them to work in the local communities and extending the work permits of migrants in-country.

Despite the cautious lifting of domestic 'lockdowns' by several countries, international travel and border control measures are still unlikely to revert to pre-coronavirus levels in the near future. The indefinite stranding of irregular migrants in border areas, either in camps or otherwise, further heightens their vulnerability and cannot be maintained for long without disastrous impacts on their lives.

As we begin to prepare for the lifting of restrictions and a post-COVID future, ASEAN member states should "[\[p\]rioritise the well-being of \[their\] peoples in ASEAN's collective fight against COVID-19](#)". This is a priority which must include a comprehensive approach for all people within their countries, particularly covering hidden populations like irregular migrants.

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