



# Protection of Migrants during COVID-19 Pandemic

## Situation Analysis of RMMRU and Tasks Ahead



### **RMMRU Contributors**

**Dr. Tasneem Siddiqui, Founding Chair**

**Dr. Syeda Rozana Rashid, Member, Executive Committee**

**Dr. Muhammad Jalal Uddin Sikder, Member, Executive Committee**

**Sayed Nurullah Azad, Member, Executive Committee**

**Dr. C R Abrar, Executive Director**



**Online Press Conference<sup>1</sup>**  
**on**  
**Protection of Migrants during COVID-19 Pandemic**  
**Situation Analysis of RMMRU and Tasks Ahead**

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure protection and wellbeing of the migrants and members of their families RMMRU has been working tirelessly with the migrants at home and abroad. Through its hotline and telephone conversations with field staff members the migrant community is expressing their concerns that require immediate action. To inform the national and global actors the hardship of those migrants RMMRU prepared this Situation Analysis report. On April 4 RMMRU organised an online press conference to disseminate this report.<sup>2</sup>

Every year around 600,000 to 700,000 Bangladeshi male and females migrate to the Gulf, other Arab and South-east Asian countries for employment. Along with them Bangladesh also has a large diaspora all over the world. The pandemic has put both of these groups in crisis. Many are spending their days in severe anxiety. Around 150,000 migrants are stranded in the Gulf region. A section of both diaspora and short term contract migrants particularly those not having valid visa are hard hit. Some even face starvation. About 100 Bangladeshis have succumbed to coronavirus in foreign lands<sup>3</sup>

Recently a number of labour migrants and members of Diaspora have returned to Bangladesh. News in the media that migrants were not following quarantine rules has created an anti-migrant psyche among the local people. Households in which migrants have returned recently are being harassed. They are being ostracized. In cases local people are unwilling to let them stay in the concerned area. Media reports inform that in some places migrants were subjected to physical assaults and extortion. They are also facing harassment and discrimination in accessing medical care.

With deep concern RMMRU observes only migrants are being identified as the source for spreading infection. All other groups who also returned recently, i.e., members of business community, students, visitors and those working in international organizations are not bracketed with the spread. Reports are there that some of them are not maintaining quarantine rules, but that did not become an issue.

Coronavirus is not only a public health disaster. It will have severe ramifications for the world economy. To meet the global crisis it is natural that the labour receiving countries will take all types of austerity measures resulting in massive job losses. For Bangladesh it will mean shrinking of labour market opportunities as well as return of workers deployed before the crisis. The government will be under stress to create new employment.

---

<sup>1</sup> Saturday, April 4, 2020 at 3 pm

<sup>2</sup> More than a thousand journalists and civil society members participated online in the event. So far it was viewed 7095 times and reached 16199 people.

<sup>3</sup> Shomoy TV News, 7.04.2020.

Compared to first three months of last year, remittance flow has reduced by 12 percent this year. Decline in remittance flow will not only affect the national economy it will also create transient poverty among remittance dependent households. Reduction in purchasing power of the migrant households will affect the local market and therefore the local community indirectly.

Of course, some positive results may also occur in the aftermath of the crisis. Almost all countries including those in the developed world are acknowledging that for a prolonged period they have not invested adequately in the health sector. This implies that large scale investment will take place in future. This will create new opportunities of job for doctors, nurses, microbiologists, lab technicians and the like.

To face the challenge of COVID-19 crisis, along with the actions currently pursued, the Government of Bangladesh needs to take some more actions: both in the short terms as well as in the long run.

### **Short term**

#### **1. Condolence**

To show respect to those who lost their lives to coronavirus, migrants and nationals, RMMRU proposes that all over the world we observe one-minute silence on April 12 at 9 am local time of the concerned country / time zone.

#### **2. Creation of Fund**

The government has created a Bangladesh Taka 5000 crore (approximately US\$590 million) fund to support the wages of those who work in export oriented industries. In similar spirit we demand creation of an emergency loan fund (without interest) to support the left behind families of migrant workers who have lost their income due to non-receipt of remittance from abroad.

#### **3. Protection in Destination Countries**

The Government should call upon the countries that are charging migrants for COVID-19 tests and treatment. It should urge them not to differentiate between citizens and migrants. Such differentiation will only jeopardize the health of their own population.

We appreciate the effort of Bangladesh missions in extending humanitarian services to the migrants with limited resources. The Ministry Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (EWOE) has allocated some funds for these missions from Wage Earners' Welfare Fund. It is not fair that services to migrants are delivered only from the Fund that they generated through their own subscription. The government needs to provide funds from its own exchequer to firmly reiterate its commitment to migrants.

In most instances, migrant workers live in cramped, unhygienic condition. The fear is if one is infected it will spread like wildfire. Current efforts of missions to disseminate information about safety in Bangla should be a continuous endeavor.

The Bangladeshi migrants, who are working in emergency services sector including health, should be provided with masks and appropriate personal protection equipments.

#### **4. Responsibilities of BAIRA**

As the only federating body of Bangladeshi recruiting agencies BAIRA should create an emergency fund from subscription of its members.

It should immediately instruct its members to submit a list of migrants whom they have charged money. Ministry of EWOE should demand such a list from BAIRA.

BAIRA should also instruct its members to return money to workers in those cases where the recruiting agencies have not started processing.

From the above mentioned emergency fund BAIRA should provide assistance to those migrant families whose papers were processed but could not avail flights due to sudden outbreak of COVID-19.

The fund should also be used to provide humanitarian cash grant to migrant families who are in distress.

#### **5. Stabilizing Remittance Flow**

In the countries of destination many remittance transfer houses are not operating. The Government should urge those countries to treat remittance transfer as emergency service and keep the facilities open so that migrants who still have earning can send remittance.

To keep its foreign exchange reserve buoyant the Government should consider giving additional financial incentives to the remittance senders.

#### **6. Gender Sensitivity**

The impact of COVID-19 pandemic will differ significantly on the basis of gender. The Bangladesh missions should work out modalities with authorities of destination country to create channel of communication with those female migrants who are working in home. Concerns of safety of women working in other sectors should also receive equal attention.

#### **7. Harness the experience of returnee migrants**

Germany has recently employed 300 refugees to work as health professionals. In order to reduce the negative mindset toward returnees, particularly those from Italy, government can invite them to participate in providing services to combat the pandemic.

### **Long Term Measures**

#### **1. Guideline of Serving Migrants During Emergency Situations**

There is no established guideline about how labour migrants should be dealt with in emergency situations. This crisis creates an opportunity to frame such a guideline that can be incorporated in the Overseas Employment Policy, 2016. Specific budget has to be allocated for emergency situation under the Guideline. Likewise, the Infection Disease Control and Eradication Act, 2018 needs to incorporate the migrant issue with due importance.

#### **2. Database of Returnee Migrants**

The Ministry of Health has located migrants who returned after the outbreak of COVID-19 by using arrival data of civil aviation and immigration departments. RMMRU demands that following the same method Ministry of EWOE should start generating a database of all returnee migrants as a permanent ongoing effort.

### **3. Payment of Arrear Dues**

Taking advantage of the COVID-19 outbreak some countries have taken measures to deport so-called irregular migrants. RMMRU strongly condemns such unethical step. Many migrant workers, who lost their jobs due to corona crisis, have not been able to secure their due wages and other benefits. After the crisis is over, if some migrants are sent back the government should make sure that all dues of the migrants are cleared before departure.

### **4. Irregular Migration and Trafficking**

In the aftermath of the pandemic if regular migration process is slows down then people will take desperate moves to secure employment. The trafficking and human smuggling syndicates take advantage of the situation. The government should prepare its administration, make them accountable and use civil society organizations to create awareness against irregular migration. More importantly, it should create alternative job opportunities at home.

### **5. Utilisation Skills of Returnee Migrants**

In Bangladesh a large number of foreign workers are working in infrastructure, power, manufacturing, service sector etc. A section of returnee migrants may match the skills required in those sectors. An online database should be immediately initiated to register returnee migrants with specific skills. Private sector should be encouraged to employ workers from this data portal.

### **6. Skilled Human Resources**

In order to access the job market that will be created in the post COVID-19 reconstruction of health sector in various countries; the government should immediately bring change in its education and human resources policy. It should make microbiology, biotechnology and BSc nursing course mandatory for all public and private universities. At the same time increased number of courses to train lab technicians and other auxiliary health service providers be introduced in technical and vocational training centres.

### **7. Responsibility of Regional Groups**

In the post corona phase, the member states of Colombo Process and Abu Dhabi Dialogue should develop appropriate short and long term strategies for protection of migrants during emergency. At appropriate time, the government needs to initiate discussions in those fora.

### **Conclusion**

The Corona pandemic has provided an opportunity to the policy makers to creatively address a massive health emergency. It has implications for different sectors of the economy. RMMRU has proposed the long and short term measures to address the challenges faced by the migration sector. It hopes that the different ministries of the government, civil society, media and the private sector will give due consideration to the suggestions.

RMMRU Contributors

Dr. Tasneem Siddiqui, Founding Chair

Dr. Syeda Rozana Rashid, Member, Executive Committee

Dr. Muhammad Jalal Uddin Sikder, Member, Executive Committee

Sayed Nurullah Azad, Member, Executive Committee

Dr. C R Abrar, Executive Director