

## **The Plight of Migrant Workers During the COVID-19 Crisis**

On April 30 the Christian Conference of Asia hosted a webinar on this topic. Bishop Philip Huggins, the President of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) participated and this summary is drawn from his notes.

Input was received from experts in this field from across Asia.

It is obvious COVID-19 has rendered the vulnerable much more vulnerable. There are many issues identified as a consequence of this crisis.

### **1. Migrants stranded within their own country (Internal)**

- Millions across Asia have travelled within their country for work. Now work has stopped they are stranded by COVID19 restrictions on travel.
- With no income for food and shelter, many are in crowded accommodation with little to prevent the further spread of COVID-19 infection. There are reports of folk literally starving across the region.

### **2. Migrants stranded in another country (External)**

- Many now have no work, no pay and few savings, having had to service debts and send cash home.
- Crowded accommodation amplifies the risk that COVID19 infection will spread. This is especially true of workers in construction industries.
- Domestic workers, mostly women, lose accommodation and income as their middle-class employers lose their employment.
- Little or no Government assistance comes from the host country or from their own Government.
- Migrant workers, those on Temporary Visas fall through the cracks as Government 'rescue packages' prioritise citizens.
- There is little access to medical care or to preventive masks and hand-sanitiser.
- Court delays impact those with pending cases to address claims of exploitation, visa issues, etc. With no new court date, this amplifies issues of poverty, especially housing and income.
- As fear and anxiety rise, so does racism. There are more 'hate' messages on social media as international and local extremist groups exploit these circumstances.
- Millions are stranded because there are no flights. Planned rescue missions will only pick up a small percentage of those stranded.
- No work means there is now no income to send home to poor and dependent families. Many migrant workers are the main source of income for their families and communities at home, for example India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and the Philippines. As one example, one presenter suggested \$US 32 Billion p.a. comes back to the Philippines from the estimated 3 million migrant workers working overseas.

### **3. Issues shared in common by internal and external migrant workers**

- Going home but without income, even where it is possible, only amplifies issues of poverty and overcrowding. Reports suggest that some returning home bring COVID19 with them.
- Poor nutrition, exacerbated by this crisis, leads to more disease.
- False information causes some who have gone home to villages, to then return to big cities, only to find the promise of re-employment is false. This causes more confusion, fear and hunger in crowded areas where disease readily spreads. This is especially so given the lack of testing and of preventative equipment available.
- ‘Undocumented’ migrants are a particularly vulnerable group in these current circumstances as casual work evaporates.
- Migrants who have relocated to places like the United States are now trying to return home as rising unemployment grows in the host country. For the home communities, a large influx of returning migrant workers places greater demand on already stretched housing, employment, health care.

### **4. The Role of Churches**

- Churches everywhere are being overwhelmed by the level of need for food, accommodation, counselling, medical assistance and care for those impacted by rising gender-based and domestic violence.
- Local churches and village churches are overwhelmed by the needs of their local communities, let alone the needs of those able to return home.
- In some places, the lack of a strong ecumenical platform, has meant that the necessary co-operation is not as good as it might be, sometimes exposing an unhelpful parochialism.
- Wealthier churches can struggle to get consent from denominational authorities for the release of resources for ecumenical emergency assistance.

### **5. In Australia**

- Our National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) advocacy is on behalf of 1.1 million temporary visa holders. For many people seeking asylum, the loss of work means they can't buy food, can't pay rent, can't stay safe.
- Local churches and church agencies are being overwhelmed by requests at the same time as their own income is drying up and staff are being made redundant.

Whilst the State and Territory Governments have stepped up to provide assistance to people on temporary visas within our communities, asylum seekers and people on bridging visas awaiting determination of their refugee status in Australia are amongst some of the most vulnerable as they lack access to Medicare and Centrelink and no dedicated COVID-19 support. They were among the first to lose casual employment in March and any savings have been spent on accommodation and food in the past month.

NCCA has joined with the Refugee Council of Australia in taking action and encourages you to join:

1. Email your Federal MP seeking COVID-19 relief for people seeking asylum and refugees

[https://action.refugeecouncil.org.au/email\\_covid\\_19](https://action.refugeecouncil.org.au/email_covid_19)

2. Share #NobodyLeftBehind graphics and info texts on social media

<https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/nlb-share/>