

Urgent call to action: Protection of Nepali cross-border migrant workers

Last year in 2020, as India started recording rising numbers of COVID- 19 cases followed by strict lockdown measures, thousands of Nepali migrant workers were forced to return home after losing their jobs in various Indian cities followed by the fear of virus transmission. With the probability of getting stuck in a foreign land, without income or savings, more than 4,00,000 Nepali migrant workers made painstaking journeys to Nepal, to the safety of their homes and families.¹ However, lack of employment opportunities and government support and exhaustion of their already limited savings left them no options but to return to India within a matter of weeks.

Now, as the second wave of the pandemic in India has seeped through the borders to many parts of Nepal, Nepali migrant workers face a serious dilemma yet again.

Despite increasing severity of the pandemic, Nepal's distressing scenario has repeated from last year as reliable and functional COVID testing facilities are still not regulated at the border. As a result, migrant workers are heading to their hometowns and their families without being tested or quarantined, carrying severe risks of COVID-19 transmission. Without an effective monitoring system that documents and traces the incoming migrant workers, larger number of Nepali citizens face the threats of the pandemic.

Along with the health and safety insecurities, reverse migration since last year has compounded issues of unemployment in Nepal and even the migrant workers living in India are facing extreme challenges to survive. With reported deaths of 40 Nepalis and close to 100 hospitalized in India, the plights of cross border migrants need urgent government attention.²

As a complement to the ongoing COVID- 19 relief efforts, Centre for Social Change (CSC), Nepal Institute of Peace (NIP) and Jana Kendra collectively call on the Government of Nepal to undertake following actions to urgently address current issues of the cross-border migrant workers:

- **Take action to provide cross border migrant workers with border point information:**

Nepal government needs to provide accurate and ample information on border point procedures, COVID-safety protocols, PCR and antigen testing, availability of quarantine and isolation units and provision of health care facilities, food and accommodation at the border points, etc.

- **Strengthen coordination between border security team and the local governments:**

Local government needs to coordinate with border security points in order to document precise data and information of incoming cross border migrant workers. Local and provincial government must properly track progress of returnee migrants that are hospitalized or in quarantine facilities and track their mobility once they travel to their respective towns and villages.

- **Take action to provide immediate relief:**

Relief distributions in terms of food, basic necessities, COVID- safety supplies (masks, sanitizers, gloves etc.) must be distributed to needy families of cross border migrant workers and immediate monetary compensation must be provided to the families in case of their demise.

1 Nepali Workers Returning to India. <https://www.nepalitimes.com/here-now/nepali-workers-returning-to-india/>

2 India's Covid catastrophe hits Nepalis hard. <https://www.nepalitimes.com/here-now/indias-covid-catastrophe-hits-nepalis-hard/>

- **Take action to prioritize cross border migrant workers to get vaccinated against COVID-19:**

Since cross border migrants carry high chance of COVID transmission on their journey between Nepal and India, government must prioritize to vaccinate them at border entry points.

- **Psychological counseling must be provided to the returnee migrants:**

With high accounts of distress, trauma and fear caused by the devastating effects of the pandemic, returnee migrants need humane assistance and counselling throughout the stages of border security protocol. To avoid discrimination and stigmatization of COVID- 19, community awareness and support must be strengthened.

- **Address the above stated issues in the upcoming budget of federal, provincial and local governments:**

To properly address the problems of workers who regularly travel between Nepal and India, Nepal government needs to take necessary initiatives in the upcoming budgets of three tiers of governments for the FY 2078/079 to attend to their issues at the local level.

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