

Return Migration to Pakistan during COVID-19 Pandemic: Unmaking the Challenges

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Abstract

In order to contain the spread of corona virus (COVID-19) disease, strict border closure measures have been taken globally. Migrants and refugees are affected across the globe due to such measures. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic recession escalated across the globe which is expected to have serious implications for the migrant workers and laborers. Potohar region was selected to explore implications of return migration from abroad, but the fieldwork halted immediately due to the pandemic outbreak. Since the data on Pakistani migrants is dispersed and scant, it was nearly impossible to stick to the locale for returnees. Therefore, the data for this study was collected qualitatively using exploratory methodology. In-depth interviews were conducted using interview guide as a tool of research. The paper is based on analysis of the narratives based on the experiences of the returnees especially. It sheds light on the state of the stranded Pakistani migrants who have been returning or awaiting repatriation due to layoffs. It delves into long-run and short-run challenges due to return migration, in Pakistan which highly depends on remittances from abroad. Challenges created by sudden end to remittances, entrepreneurial setups and returnees' reintegration in the society need immediate attention. It is recommended that the state should support and monitor the migrants living abroad, ease out issues in repatriation of the laid off workers, pave way for investment, offer insurance plans, reduce reliance on remittance flow and engage them in Public Private Partnerships for sustainable reintegration.

Keywords: Migrant, Returnees, Laborers, Gulf state, Repatriation, COVID-19, Re-integration.

Introduction

A mysterious pneumonia outbreak in late December 2019 characterized by dry cough, fever and fatigue happened in a wet seafood market in China that expanded globally within weeks. It is termed as novel corona

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virus disease-2019; COVID-19 by WHO on 11th February, 2020¹. After the Second World War, this pandemic is perceived as the most dreadful global health catastrophe of this century to pose the utmost challenges to humankind.² The epidemic progression could only be delayed or slowed down through quarantine measures which helped in containment of this disease since mid of February.³ On 26th February 2020, the first two cases for COVID-19 surfaced in Pakistan, which led to appearance of three more cases within 48 hours in various cities across the country without any mutual connection amongst the patients.⁴ The International Organization for Migration and UNHCR announced on 10 March 2020 that resettlement travelling for refugees will be temporarily suspended, although the agencies have appealed to states to ensure emergency cases are exempted.⁵ Even then, it is argued that vigilant monitoring of the immigrant travel volume and stock data based on peoples' mobility corridors (in both countries of destinations and origin), countries could have prepared themselves in a better way to take early measures in containment of COVID-19.⁶

Measures for containment of COVID-19 in Pakistan

As of 5 June 2020, the confirmed positive cases reached up to 94,000 cases with 405 per million daily confirmed cases and mortality rate of

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- ¹ Yi-Chi Wu, Ching-Sung Chen, and Yu-Jiun Chan, 'The outbreak of COVID-19: An overview', *Journal of the Chinese Medical Association*, 83: 3 (2020), 217.
 - ² Indranil Chakraborty & Prasenjit Maity, 'COVID-19 outbreak: Migration, effects on society, global environment and preventio', *Science of the Total Environment* (2020), 138882.
 - ³ Chinazzi, Matteo, Jessica T. Davis, Marco Ajelli, Corrado Gioannini, Maria Litvinova, Stefano Merler, Ana Pastore y Piontti, et. al., 'The effect of travel restr ictions on the spread of the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak', *Science* 368, no. 6489 (2020), 395-400.
 - ⁴ Muhammad Yousaf, Samiha Zahir, Muhammad Riaz, Sardar Muhammad Hussain, and Kamal Shah, 'Statistical Analysis of Forecasting COVID-19 for Upcoming Month in Pakistan', *Chaos, Solitons & Fractals* (2020), 109926.
 - ⁵ UN News, 'COVID-19: agencies temporarily suspend refugee resettlement travel', 17 March 2020. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1059602>. Accessed 26 May 2020.
 - ⁶ Ibrahim Sirkeci, and Mustafa Murat Yucesahin, 'Coronavirus and Migration: Analysis of Human Mobility and the Spread of Covid-19', *Migration Letters* 17:2 (2020), 379-398.

2.1 per cent.⁷ In the Pakistani context, calamitous consequence of the global pandemic such as (12.3 to 18.53) millions of employees layoffs both locally and internationally is expected across various economic sectors as an the aftermath of countrywide complete or partial lockdown for the containment of disease outbreak. In this regard, radical precautionary measures have been taken to curb the spread of COVID-19 which includes⁸ establishment of the cell in National Disaster Management Authority, NDMA and National Coordination Committee, NCC for COVID-19⁹. Apart from this, all educational institutions were closed, borders were sealed with the neighboring countries, screening of travelers and imposition of travel bans, plan on comprehensive food security restriction in every kind of public gathering either it be political, religious or cultural were made.

Pakistani migrants and foreign remittances

A large share of Pakistan's economy is based on foreign remittances. It is evident from the fact that it is among top 10 recipients of global remittances. In 2019, Pakistan received Rs. 21.8 billion foreign remittances, which contributes to about 8 per cent of its GDP. In the meantime, the migrant workers in GCC countries dropped to about 60 per cent in 2018 compared to 2015, which is mainly due to the nationalization policies opted by these countries.¹⁰ The decline in demand for Pakistani migrant workers is alarming and needs immediate attention. Likewise, the strict regulations imposed by the European Union against refugees and asylum seekers during the migrants' crisis in 2019 aggravated the situation.¹¹ The current layoffs of Pakistani migrant workers due to COVID-19 will further worsen the situation. An official from the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Pakistanis informed that

⁷ Corona Tracker Pakistan. 2020, <https://www.coronatracker.com/country/pakistan/>. Accessed 5 June 2020.

⁸ '10 steps Pakistan is taking to contain coronavirus', Pakistan – Gulf News. <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/10-steps-pakistan-is-taking-to-contain-coronavirus-1.70403640>. Accessed 17 May 2020.

⁹ NDMA National Disaster Management Authority Pakistan. <http://www.ndma.gov.pk/>. Accessed 17 April 2020.

¹⁰ S. Plaza, D. Ratha, S. De, E. J. Kim, G. Seshan, and N. D. Yameogo, 'Migration and Remittances: Recent Developments and Outlook', *Migration and Development Brief*, 31 (2019).

¹¹ Kashif Majeed Salik, 'Policy Review Remittances and COVID-19: Is Pakistan ready for a likely decline in flows?' (Islamabad: Sustainable Development Policy Institute, 2020).

foreign remittances had already halved in the past two months and are anticipated to decrease by \$1 billion to \$1.5 billion per year if the situation perseveres. He also noted that an appraised 10,000 to 11,000 households will be directly affected.¹²

Current living conditions of migrant workers in different countries

The poor living condition of the migrant workers is not veiled from the world. In first week of April, Singapore announced quarantine of 20,000 migrant workers once infection was detected in their dormitories. Labor camps are known for being cramped since they lack basic sanitary and hygiene facilities. Dormitories were isolated, but it was announced that workers will be paid and given meals thrice a day. However, the labor complained of overcrowding and filthiness. Little provisions have been made by the Nepali and Indian authorities for their returnees leading to crowded border. Malaysian migrants' workers were seen sleeping on streets of Singapore. Desperation is seen in quarantined construction workers of Qatar. Urgent action was called by Geneva Council for Rights and Liberties for urgent protection of migrants stuck in UAE. Migrant agricultural workers in Canada are considered causative of a potential disaster since they are tested positive. US under the Trump administration allowed the food and agriculture workers to continue their work without defining any SOPs, leaving them unprotected. Migrant workers in Maldives, comprising 25 per cent of the total population, were living in congested and squatter settlements where social distancing could not be maintained. Cases with COVID-19 positive were also found in camps of migrant workers in Greece which were quarantined.¹³ The labor-intensive enterprises in China having a large number of migrant populations eased the communicability of transmission. Consequently, in order to meet the pre-requisite for isolation, the workers were required to take measures of personal protection preventing the clustered outbreaks of pandemic.¹⁴

¹² 'Annual remittances likely to shrink by over \$1bn,' *The News*, 2 April 2020. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/638041-annual-remittances-likely-to-shrink-by-over-1bn>. Accessed 28 May 2020.

¹³ Sophia Svensson, 'Covid-19: The situation for migrant workers is worsening. International Observatory Human Rights. April 6, 2020. <https://observatoryihr.org/news/covid-19-the-situation-for-migrant-workers-is-worsening/>. Accessed 27 May 2020.

¹⁴ Ze-Liang Chen, Qi Zhang, Yi Lu, Zhong-Min Guo, Xi Zhang, Wen-Jun Zhang, Cheng Guo, et al., 'Distribution of the COVID-19 epidemic and

Review of literature

The review of literature has been thematically organized in terms of challenges of the returnee migrants. IOM suggests that there is need for understanding the migration and mobility implications. Their recent analytical snapshot on discrimination and stigmatization in crisis situation focuses on how certain groups, specifically the migrants are stigmatized in a crisis situation. Migrants are often scapegoated for endangering the lives of native populations in such pandemics. Such diseases are at times perceived as ‘foreign’, for instance the cholera case of 1830s, 1980’s case of HIV/ AIDS or, more recently, with H1N1 influenza. The case of COVID-19 is no exception to it since individuals of Euro-Asian descents and migrants more generally are getting stigmatized for spreading the virus.¹⁵ Not just stigmatization, the overall vulnerability of the migrant population increases in such cases. In the context of this study, the social and institutional exclusion from the recipient societies in terms of expulsion from jobs has been taken into account.

Social exclusion, migrants and refugees

It is believed that this pandemic is the most pervasive of the recent epidemics that will transform the patterns and norms of human interaction. The core protocol demands social distancing and isolation. Social exclusion makes the detection and prevention of this disease easier. In case of infection, to avoid spread, the patients should be strictly incubated under strict clinical guidelines so that their electrolytes and all body fluids can be consistently checked along with vital signs.¹⁶ Given the circumstances under which the low paid migrants and refugees survive, social exclusion is nearly impossible to observe. Therefore, migrants and refugees are the most vulnerable sections of the society in such cases of pandemic as they normally live in communal settings or individual accommodation in congested and overcrowded areas. They

correlation with population emigration from Wuhan, China’, *Chinese Medical Journal* (2020).

¹⁵ IOM-UN Migration. 2020. COVID-19 Analytical Snapshot #6: Stigmatization and discrimination Understanding the migration & mobility implications of COVID-19. https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/our_work/ICP/MPR/covid-19_analytical_snapshot_6_-_stigmatization_and_discrimination.pdf, 02 April 2020. Accessed 3 June 2020.

¹⁶ S. Raza, M. A. Rasheed, M. K. Rashid, ‘Transmission Potential and Severity of COVID-19 in Pakistan’, Preprints 2020, 2020040004 (doi: 10.20944/preprints202004.0004.v1).

often lack access to reasonable living conditions, adequate access to water, food and health facilities. They are generally excluded from any national health promotion and awareness programs, treatment and care or disease prevention.¹⁷

International legal rights of migrants

Keeping in view the legal rights of the migrants, international labor standards, migrant laws, and international human rights obligations, WHO has aligned its strategic response plan to COVID-19.¹⁸ The member states are supposed to seek guidance and respond as per the WHO interim guidance to curb COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in humanitarian situations especially for migrants and refugees.¹⁹ The guiding principles suggest that the migrants should have a right to enjoy the highest attainable mental and physical living standard, they should not be discriminated in any manner, they should have access to equitable health services, health system for refugees and migrants should be gender and child inclusive and people centered, they should be treated equally at work places, whole-of-society and whole-of-government approaches should be followed in partnerships and approaches for coordinated response to COVID-19 and they should be centered on in social inclusion policies, ensuring migrants' participation in national action response and plans.²⁰

International organizations and migrant population

A temporary suspension in travel resettlement of refugees was announced on 10th March, by UNCHR and International Organization for Migration and UNHCR, however, the agencies appealed to states that the

¹⁷ World Health Organization, *Preparedness, Prevention and Control of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) for Refugees and Migrants in Non-camp Settings: Interim Guidance*, 17 April 2020. No. WHO/2019-nCoV/Refugees_Migrants/2020.1. World Health Organization, 2020.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Interim Guidance Scaling-up COVID-19 outbreak, readiness and response operations in humanitarian situations including camps and camp-like setting, Geneva, IASC, March 2020, <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/other/interim-guidance-scaling-covid-19-outbreak-readinessand-response-operations-camps-and-camp>. Accessed 27 May 2020.

²⁰ Ibid.

emergency cases should be exempted.²¹ Also, it was made clear that there must not be any forced returns based and justified through fears or suspicion of COVID-19 transmission, especially because it is estimated to be on low risk of transmission from migrant population and refugees to host populations in the WHO European region.²² Yet refugees and migrants are often stigmatized and discriminated unjustly in spreading communicable diseases. Such kind of unacceptable attitudes further risk the health outcomes of general public, including the host populations, as migrants and refugees could then be fearful in disclosure of symptoms and seeking treatment²³. Generally, the evidence suggests that the host population is at a low risk of catching epidemic from this vulnerable population segment. However, migrants and refugees are at an increased risk of potentially contracting with this communicable disease; COVID-19, because they generally reside in congested areas without access to basic sanitation.²⁴

Implications of Lock down in Gulf-Arab States

According to government sources, there are almost 4.7 million recorded Pakistanis employed in the Middle East.²⁵ However, it is hard to determine the role of migrant labour in the Gulf, where jobs in construction, sanitation and transportation are primarily undertaken by millions of workers from Pakistan. In the wake of the ongoing corona virus pandemic, millions of migrant workers in the Gulf countries have been dismissed. The government of Saudi Arabia announced a relief package which would partly compensate for worker salaries in March

²¹ UN News. COVID-19: agencies temporarily suspend refugee resettlement travel. 17 March 2020. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1059602>. Accessed 27 May 2020.

²² WHO. *Report on the health of refugees and migrants in the WHO European Region: No Public Health without Refugee and Migrant Health* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2018).

²³ Norwegian Refugee Council. *10 things you should know about coronavirus and refugees*, 2020. <https://www.nrc.no/news/2020/march/10-things-you-should-know-about-coronavirus-and-refugees>. Accessed 26 May 2020.

²⁴ Hans Henri P. Kluge, Zsuzsanna Jakab, Jozef Bartovic, Veronika D'Anna, and Santino Severoni, 'Refugee and migrant health in the COVID-19 response', *The Lancet* 395, no. 10232 (2020): 1237-1239.

²⁵ Yearbook 2017-2018, 'Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development, Govt. of Pakistan. <http://callsarzameen.ophrd.gov.pk/web/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Year-Book-2017-18.pdf>

2020. However, this relief only applied to Saudi citizens. A new law passed in UAE which authorized businesses to slash wages momentarily or even permanently for non-citizen personnel. Hence, as a result of COVID-19, migrants in the Gulf States are stranded. They have been forced into lockdown in overcrowded, unhygienic environments without income and resources to return home owing to travel limitations. On April 10, 2020, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan announced that overseas Pakistanis would not be deserted and left to fend on their own.

Methodology

The data on Pakistani migrants is dispersed and limited. This research paper is based on exploratory research methodology focusing on the immediate response of the host countries of the workers. This response ranges from the vulnerabilities and state of stranded migrants posed by the pandemics, the issues they face in repatriation and its implications. The research is an attempt to generate narratives of the returnees by taking into account the literature published since the Corona outbreak on its implications on the migrant workers. It sheds light on the state of the stranded Pakistani migrants who are returning or awaiting repatriation due to layoffs. The respondents were approached purposively and some were identified through snowball sampling. The tool of research was interview guide; whereby the interviews were conducted online telephonically keeping in view the SoPs of interaction emerged out of this pandemic and current research ethics.

Findings

The actual COVID-19 impact on the global economy as well as on the migrant workers and remittance flows is not yet clear. There is a possibility of job losses, unemployment and low wages for the migrants working in the 'recession-hit' sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and services during and after the COVID-19. However, if the current situation of this pandemic persists globally, a 10 per cent decline in remittance flows of Pakistan may occur. The second possible outcome of COVID-19 spread is large influx of the Pakistani migrant workers from destination countries, particularly from GCC countries. In this regard, a modest-to-major decline in economic growth is likely in the Global North. GCC region may trigger a large decline in migration flows, which may reach up to 30 per cent. The third possible outcome of COVID-19 is it may hit severely the flow of remittances to Pakistan if the geographic extent and spread of the disease prolongs. This may cause a sharp decline in economic activities in migrant workers' destination countries resulting in unemployment, job losses and low wages besides

the rising cost of living (including health, education, accommodation as well as access to loans for businesses). Under these circumstances, the remittance flows may reduce to half from the current level.

The issues of migrants returning back to Pakistan when explored vary from country to country, as the following subsections reveal.

- a. *The United States of America*: immediately banned immigration to US except for its citizens from 16th March 2020 and suspended processing of all work visa types and appointments by 20th March 2020 as the pandemic scaled up in USA.²⁶ Not only thousands of Pakistanis were in the immigration process, but also, many were out of the country for vacations. Four respondents returning from US were approached. Two of them came on a break from their respective employees to Pakistan; one had to travel when this news of pervasive pandemic outbreak was viral and one got stuck in transit. Quoting a few verbatim from US returnees that;

‘I had to fly back to Pakistan for fortnight visit on 16th of March, but the emerging stress generated out of the narratives on social media forced me to leave US immediately and get back to Pakistan. Since I had no other option to think of, I immediately contacted the airlines, paid extra for a change in booking and left US on 13th of March. There was chaos on US airports and all transit airports I have been through due to the immense uncertainty and implications of the pandemic pertaining to returning back to the destination countries. I was a bit contented since I had enough finances which could take me back home in case of any emergency but the travelers with me were in immense state of despair. Most of them had no hope to return back and were in a state of anxiety about their jobs, assets and commitments back at work in US’.

The one who got stuck in the middle, left US on 21st of March which was almost the deadline for exiting US in the pandemic situation. He shared that:

‘I have never seen such a terror and uncertain environment ever around me. People at the airports were rushing like anything, paying extra for change of flights, all the counters were full, and the security was pushing people to observe

²⁶ US State Government & US Embassy Pakistan. <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/ea/covid-19-visa-services-and-restrictions.html> & <https://pk.usembassy.gov/visas/>. Accessed 3 March 2020

social distancing and SOPs to stay protected from the pandemic. Some were trying to follow by wearing masks and gloves, some were distancing from others, others were in a hurry to buy their return tickets, some were gathering documents at immigration, some were rushing after the luggage, women had their families along but had no idea how many tickets could they manage and who had to stay back. It felt that the world is about to collapse and everybody was trying to jump on the last ship that could have protected them from sinking. Now, I do think of returning back to work but my work permit has expired and the immigration processing is banned. My employer is directed by the US government to induct the local citizens keeping the national interest due to very high rate of unemployment. I neither have a way to get back, nor an opportunity in Pakistan due to immense downsizing in the job market’.

- b. *Britain*: Britain is a home to above a million Pakistanis. Apart from that thousands are on students and work visas especially those hailing from Mirpur and Potohar. Most of them are settled over four decades. Some are striving to make their future, however, in the current circumstances, a lot of immigrants are returning back due to the economic crisis. DW report says that thousands of Pakistanis having UK nationality are stuck in Pakistan and they are extremely annoyed at the repatriation efforts made by the government of UK.²⁷ On the other hand, when special flights were arranged to repatriate Pakistanis from UK to Pakistan, hundreds of returnees have complained on the issues they had faced due to closure of air space and a single National carrier allowed serving the people which is cancelling flights repeatedly. People getting back from UK have limited finances and most of the returnees are from the labor class. Affording multiple tickets is extremely difficult for them and has indebted most of them. Seven respondents were interviewed repatriating from the UK. One of them said:

‘I was stranded in despair as I got to know that we cannot fly back due to closure of international flights across the globe. I was fired from my job in the very beginning of March and had meager resources to afford a ticket back home. There were no flight carriers operating. Nor I had

²⁷ Omaisra Gill, 2020. British Pakistanis angry about coronavirus repatriation effort. dw, 10 May 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/british-pakistanis-angry-about-coronavirus-repatriation-effort/a-53374374>

any relatives in UK. I lived in a small Pakistani community with my fellow workers who tried to support me in difficult times. All I wanted was to save enough money which could allow me to fly back. It was astonishing for us when the amount of ticket was quoted. It was three times than the regular price which I managed to buy by taking credit from some friends. At the eleventh hour, we were informed that we cannot fly back home since the flight was cancelled due to some reason. Upon approaching the airline, it was informed that your amount will be returned in the form of voucher. To cut the story short, after seeking help from some law makers and embassy, I managed to get another booking to return back. Upon reaching Lahore, we were informed that we will be quarantined for 14 days in pre-decided hotels. The COVID test in itself was so traumatic that the very memory brings the pain back. It was horrifying me since I was already indebted and was not in a position to pay the hotel bill. Luckily, my test came negative and I was freed to go home after two days. The local transport was banned at that time. My brother managed to book a private car and came to pick me. He paid all my bills and saved me at that moment. After three months of unemployment and bewilderment, I reached home and thanked the Almighty and my family for all the efforts. I am now at peace that I am backing home, but the future is haunting me now. I used to send the remittances and hence could not save. Neither I have any savings to initiate any business nor do I have any hope to get back to Britain to work.

- c. *United Arab Emirates*: Resulting economic recessions from COVID-19, have meant tough breaks for migrant communities across the globe. But the large numbers, not to mention the diversity of emigrants in the Gulf countries, means that harm to their health and finances will reverberate across continents. Many of the losses that the Gulf countries face have had the trickle-down effect on the labour force. This loss in income will not only upset the workers, but also the countries where they send their remittances. For Pakistan, remittances make up about 86 per cent of the secondary income

balance of the economy of Pakistan.²⁸ Nearly 60 percent of these are from the Gulf countries.²⁹

It is estimated that UAE homes approximately 1.5 million Pakistanis, most of them are low-paid workers living in congested settlements and currently stranded due to unemployment resultant of the corona virus crisis. In order to bring them back, the repatriation flights began in April since thousands of Pakistanis in the UAE asked their government to fly them home which was pushed by the UAE's warning in reviewing labor ties with countries which refuse to take back their nationals.

The representative from the consular affairs from UAE exclaims that before departure on repatriation flights, everyone is tested and the infected ones are barred from travelling. However, he did not address the concerns of Foreign Office on living conditions of the returnees. On the contrary, the Special Assistant to Pakistan's Prime Minister on National Security shared that the number of COVID positive cases in people returning from the UAE are higher than expectations. In most flights from UAE, an average of 12 percent people was testing positive but on a few flights the number augmented to around 40 and 50 percent. It is, therefore, hypothesized that a lot of workers and laborers live in congested dormitories and essentially ease the contagious spread of the disease. Gulf Arab states have also boosted up testing after recording a mounting number of cases among laborers and low-wage workers in crowded housing. The narratives of 11 returnees from the Gulf States have been recorded in the form of in-depth interviews. The on-ground conditions were pathetic. Since most of the returnees belonged to the lower middle and lower class working as laborers in Gulf States, they barely have enough resources to sustain their livelihood in emergencies. Most of them live in very crowded spaces often provided by the companies they work with. A single small room homes 6-10 people. One of them shared that as the news of pandemic spread across UAE and the oil prices dropped, their employers laid them off without any notice period. Neither their contracts allowed them to join any other employer nor they had any opportunity. One of them narrated:

Everyday we were hearing news of friends who were being laid off. We were quarantined in dormitories which were

²⁸ *Pakistan Economic Survey 2018-2019* (Islamabad: Ministry of Finance, Government of Pakistan, 2019). http://www.finance.gov.pk/survey/chapters_19/8-Trade%20and%20payments.pdf. Accessed 28 May 2020.

²⁹ Country Wise- Workers Remittances, State Bank of Pakistan. <http://www.sbp.org.pk/ecodata/Homeremit.pdf>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

away from the main cities. The area was kind of cordoned off, and we were not allowed to go out. It was so difficult to manage food even. Passports of most of our fellows were with their employers. The sudden shut down barred us from approaching them and we could not travel without the travel document. I have never felt so helpless in my lifetime. We neither had money, nor were our dues cleared by the employers we served. Also, there was no way of approaching them since most of the offices were closed and our movement was banned. Many of us had left with no mode of communication with their companies. Some of us started having symptoms of the COVID-19, but they were denied of any access to health facility. After repeated contact with the consulate, we were informed that the repatriation services are going on. Our families back home were extremely worried. The viral on social media was already stressing us out. Most of us were ill. Some had fever, some had headache and some had flu, but all we could do was to help each other with the medicines that we already had. The hygienic conditions worsened due to diminishing resources that we had. It took us over two months to get our arrangements done for flying back. Only those of us who could afford to fly back reserved their seats. There are thousands of workers still stranded who do not have the means to return back. We were informed that we will be tested of COVID-19. But all that tested us was that laser thermometer. The flight which took us back later reported that it had 14 % positive cases. We were shifted to Haji Camp, where the living condition was miserable. I do not want to recall the arrangements made by the UAE governments and the treatment we had while immigrating back to Pakistan. Unfortunately, my friends who tested positive were quarantined for long and their experiences were terrible. Perhaps it happened to us only because we are poor and could not afford to get quarantined in a luxury hotel. Sometimes I feel, we can never get out of this trauma. Future seems so black and blur that I do not want to think about it for now’.

The consulate in Dubai shared that by the end of May 2020, 60,000 Pakistanis had registered so far to return from the UAE. Balancing the needs of the 100,000 Pakistani citizens globally who have registered as wanting to return home and preventing the spread of the virus is a

challenge. The government says that they have tested every passenger on arrival and quarantining them if required, and could currently repatriate around 8,000 citizens to Pakistan per week trying hard in facilitating the returnees without compromising the safety. Pakistan is dealing with a fast-growing number of cases, as speculated with over 15000 testing per day as of 1st day of June, 2020.³⁰

Discussion

COVID-19 can only be contained through precautionary measures which appear to be working well in the containment of the disease as comparison of the worldwide data of other nations show.³¹&³² The results of a recent study on projections of COVID-19 suggest an increasing trend of deaths and cases from May. It is recommended in continuation of the results that more stringent measures are required to control COVID-19. It is suggested that the forecasts established by this study are useful for state in planning, policy making and raising public awareness in making informed decisions so that appropriate steps could be taken to restrain the spread of the pandemic any further.

Inequality and discrimination of migrants: Studies suggest that COVID-19 has honed the focus on societal and structural inequalities existing for long in the developed North especially in USA and UK. A large number of people from several racial and ethnic minorities hold very essential jobs in social care, health, public transport and retail sectors of these countries which positions them on the front line and consequently at higher possibility of exposure to COVID-19.^{33, 34, 35} The low wage

³⁰ Ajjazeera News, 'Pakistan concerned at workers returning from UAE with coronavirus', 6 May 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/pakistan-concerned-workers-returning-uae-coronavirus-200506081618984.html>. Accessed 1 June 2020.

³¹ Pakistan has world's best National Response Program against COVID-19: WHO official, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/628662-pakistan-has-worlds-best-national-response-program-against-covid-19-who-official>. Accessed 21 May 2020.

³² COVID-19 Health Advisory Platform by Ministry of National Health Services Regulations and Coordination, <https://covid.gov.pk/>, accessed 24 May 2020.

³³ Neeraj Bhala, Gwenetta Curry, Adrian R. Martineau, Charles Agyemang, and Raj Bhopal, 'Sharpening the global focus on ethnicity and race in the time of COVID-19', *The Lancet* (2020).

workers and laborers, and racial and ethnic minorities are grouped in segregation in overloaded urban housing or sprawls and similar workplaces where self-isolation or physical distancing are nearly impossible to maintain thus leading to growing risks for the spread of COVID-19.³⁶

Long term challenges

- a. *Debt relief*: On 12 April 2020, Prime Minister Imran Khan requested the world for providing debt relief to developing countries engaged in a battle with coronavirus. In his address, he stated, 'I appeal to world leaders, to UN Secretary General (Antonio Guterres) and to heads of the financial institutions, to launch an initiative, an initiative that will give debt relief to developing countries to combat the corona virus'³⁷. Prime Minister pointed out that the developing countries with very high debt to GDP ratio already lack fiscal space in order to invest in proper healthcare facilities necessary for fighting the pandemic. Debt relief initiative was timely and, if granted, would give some breathing space to an ailing economy of Pakistan. However, the government needs to come up with a coherent strategy in order to make the most of this debt relief package and effectively tackle the impact of corona virus. Considering the current economic scenario all over the world, the G-20 countries have decided to give debt relief to 76 International Development Association (IDA) borrowing countries, including Pakistan, which have poor economies and will be facing grave economic consequences due to the ongoing pandemic. It has been agreed that all the debts falling due during May 1 till December 1, 2020 will be suspended and packaged into new loans for which the payments will not start before June 2022³⁸.

³⁴ Anthony P. Khawaja, Alasdair N. Warwick, Pirro G. Hysi, Alan Kastner, Andrew Dick, Peng T. Khaw, Adnan Tufail, Paul J. Foster, and Kay-Tee Khaw, 'Associations with covid-19 hospitalisation amongst 406,793 adults: the UK Biobank prospective cohort study', *medRxiv* (2020).

³⁵ US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 'Health of Black or African American non-Hispanic population', <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/black-health.htm>. Accessed 25 May 2020.

³⁶ C.W. Yancy, 'COVID-19 and African Americans', *JAMA*, 2020, published online 15 April 2020, DOI:10.1001/jama.2020.6548

³⁷ Amir Waseem, 'PM Imran Khan asks world for debt relief in war on COVID-19', *Dawn*, 13 April 2020.

³⁸ Khurram Husain, 'Pakistan included in...', *Dawn*, 16 April 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1549599/pakistan-included-in-g20-debt-relief-plan>

- b. *Inclusiveness*: Any response to the challenges posed by COVID-19 must be premised on the principle of inclusivity. All assistance—local and international—must take the refugee population into account. Host country governments need to put an end to all discriminatory practices. With the economy at halt, the unemployment in the country is severely pushing more people into poverty. It is important that information campaigns about the virus should be disseminated to all communities hosting asylum seekers so that these people are kept abreast of the latest development and response efforts. The Prime Minister's economic package needs to expand in terms of including assistance for the returning workers.
- c. *Global recession and unemployment*: Moreover, before the COVID-19 hit, around 60,000 people were in the process of applying abroad for jobs. Of these 20,000 Pakistani workers were in the process of entering Saudi Arabia. Given the current situation, this will not be possible in the foreseeable future. The recession in global price in oil and discontinuation of all tourist projects in the Gulf countries will mean that these countries will close doors for all foreign workers. This raises alarm bells for Pakistan since the International Monetary Fund has already estimated the unemployment rate projection for the country to be 6.2 per cent for 2020.³⁹

That said, labour is going to find it increasingly difficult to get work as businesses slow down and demand cripple. This would directly lead to massive unemployment. Unemployment has a high correlation with a country's crime rate. Already, there are reports that the crime rate in Punjab has increased significantly in the backdrop of government curfews.⁴⁰ Furthermore, if high rates of unemployment persist, it could lead to a drop in literacy rate and a rise in domestic violence as well.

Short term Challenges

- a. *Lack of remittances*: Whether the home country benefits from returning emigrants depends on the emigrant's success in accumulating savings and human capital and on the home country's ability to make use of returnees' skills and investment. That said, a

³⁹ 'Pakistan's economy: IMF projects low GDP growth, high inflation, unemployment', *The News*, 21 January 2020. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/601866-pakistan-s-economy-imf-projects-low-gdp-growth-high-inflation-unemployment>

⁴⁰ 'Lahore police fudging figures big time to hide high crime rate', *Dawn*, 16 March 2020. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1541189>. Accessed 25 May 2020.

majority of the Pakistani workers returning from abroad do not have much savings since they send money back to their families on a monthly basis.⁴¹ Shifting saving is a one-time measure. So, from the very next month, the effects of the lack of remittances will be highly visible.

- b. *Entrepreneurial activities:* Return migration can be beneficial to the economic development of the home country if correct steps are taken. Emigrants who have managed to accumulate savings, may set up small businesses when they return to Pakistan. Cottage and small-scale industries make up for 80 percent of employment in Pakistan. However, it is a neglected sector of the Pakistani economy. Hence, while setting up small businesses may help Pakistan in the short to medium term, unless correct measures are taken by the government, in the long term they will face closure and only add to the burden of the economy because of increased unemployment.
- c. *Re-integration:* In the light of Covid19, strict curfews have been enforced on daily functioning of the economy. In this scenario, a huge influx of unemployed workers, causes anxiety and even in some cases resentment—both from within existing circles and those coming in. This could have negative implications for the society. Hence, re-integration of these workers into society must be one of the top priorities of the government.

Conclusion

Based on the current literature on situation of global migrants and returnees due to COVID-19, it is the responsibility of every state to address their '*basic humanitarian needs*'. All aid groups should deploy qualified medical staff to refugee camps along with protective equipment for the on-ground humanitarian workers. Alleviation measures for overcrowding need to be taken and quarantine capacities need to be established in refugee camps. Food distribution services need to be re-engineered to avoid large congregations. Access to water and sanitation facilities need to be improved in refugee camps. The government needs to develop a '*health security strategy*' for migrants so as to safeguard the overall health of emigrants upon their return to Pakistan. All the returnees need to be tested and isolated meanwhile. Those who are tested positive should be strictly quarantined. Once they are tested negative, they should be free to get back to their places, but a centralised database

⁴¹ Bringing down the cost of remitting to Pakistan, *Express Tribune*, July 28, 2019. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2022840/6-bringing-cost-remitting-pakistan/>

of each case should be prepared to watch on the positive cases and observing their movement and any re-occurrence of the viral infection in follow-up second wave. ‘*Centralised database*’ on returnees needs to be immediately prepared that can serve multiple goals pertaining to returnees. A database needs to be established for emigrants returning to Pakistan so that their families can easily be taken care of. Both ‘*short and long term challenges*’ in repatriation of migrant workers from their countries of destination to origin have been discussed in the upcoming section. In a country like Pakistan, which is largely dependent on its foreign remittances, the pandemic and post-pandemic shock can be multilateral. Apart from collapsing the healthcare and education sector of the country, sudden decline in foreign remittances can be a serious challenge to the country. Repatriation and then reintegration of the returnees should be mitigated through effective and timely planning, policy making and implementation.

Recommendations

- a. *Support and Monitoring of migrants in countries of destination:* It is the need of the hour to keep an eye through monitoring the socio-economic conditions of the Pakistani migrant workers particularly in the GCC countries. Pakistani High Commissions, departments concerned with human resource development, and Ministry of overseas Pakistanis should engage with the Pakistani Diasporas through their networks and associations. These forums will help in collection of information and bringing the policymakers on board by engaging them to sort out solutions to the emerging issues of the immigrant population. Special efforts need to be made in supporting the families of the migrant workers in social, economic and legal issues they are currently facing. These kind of activities can be extended for inter- governmental coordination to encounter expected layoffs of Pakistani workers.
- b. *Managing repatriation and reintegration of returnee migrants:* There are hundreds and thousands of migrant workers losing their jobs and returning to Pakistan. Special flights and arrangements have been made by the Pakistani government for their repatriation which is still going on. In order to reintegrate them back in the Pakistani economy, some arrangements need to be made by keeping in view the way the global economies would respond to this crisis. There are chances of a huge number of migrants returning back to Pakistan in worst case scenario. Since the national economy is highly dependent on remittance flows, there is a dire need of mass research to

highlight the expected impact and measures to mitigate the corona aftermath.

- c. *Obstacles in returnees' investments:* Red-tapeism and bureaucracy can hamper returnees' investment efforts once they return. Pakistan being their country of origin needs to formulate policies which can encourage the returnees to gain their confidence to seek benefit from them through investment and reintegration in the labour market.
- d. *Insurance plans:* Insurance policies should be intensified and the existing policies regarding overseas Pakistanis need to be widened so as to encompass emigrants. All concerned ministries should ensure minimum job loss of overseas Pakistanis by engaging and cooperating with foreign governments so that those who persons who have already cleared the application process can still be provided for in the future.
- e. *Hiring of Pakistani labor:* Agreements have already been signed to increase hiring of Pakistani workers in the GCC countries in their labor markets. Since reduction in hiring of migrant workers in international market with a consequent decline in flow of remittances is expected, the agreements made with the GCC countries need to be taken up cautiously and effectively so that the Pakistani migrant workers can get maximum benefit out of it.
- f. *Reducing dependency on remittance flow:* In these years, huge demographic dividend is possessed by Pakistan. International immigration is a quick fix to it, however, this dividend does not last for long. There is a need of effective planning to engage the youth and generate local employment opportunities which would facilitate the national growth and subsequently reduce the current dependency on remittance flows. There are chances that the widespread impact of COVID-19 in terms of death may affect the global North in the longer run which may raise demand of migrant workers in turn. Keeping this scenario posed by this natural catastrophe, a holistic policy on the national level is need of the hour which can help in planning and strategizing to withhold immense brain-drain required as human capital, to ensure sustainable development and future growth of the nation.
- g. *Public-private partnerships:* Government and the private sector can engage in a public-private partnerships by the relevant departments. To this end efforts should encourage establishing, registering, training and facilitating the cottage industries to improve quality production following the international standards. Moreover, there is need for designing sound policies and securing financial and legal environment to stimulate investment other capital inflows. Even

though COVID-19, has halted major projects in the Gulf region, once activities resume, there will be a demand for labour force. In this case, the Government of Pakistan should ensure that proper training is provided to the labour force to make them more competitive.