

Tens of thousands of Nepali workers stranded abroad by COVID-19 disaster

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Tens of thousands of Nepali migrant workers remain trapped in several foreign countries by the coronavirus pandemic because the Stalinist Communist Party of Nepal-led government is barring them from reentering the poverty-stricken country.

Over four million migrant Nepalis are currently working in India, the Gulf States and South Korea. Many have lost their jobs and have no income because of the lockdowns imposed in those countries.

The *Kathmandu Post* reported on April 17 that at least 20,000 Nepali people want to return home and that hundreds of workers employed in India are joining those already stuck at border crossings between the two countries.

Indian and Nepali security forces at border posts are preventing the migrant workers from entering Nepal. Rather than allow these workers to return home, Kathmandu claims that their entry will further spread the virus.

On April 17, the Nepal Supreme Court ruled that the government should take immediate steps to bring the country's migrant worker citizens back home. The court's decision was in response to a petition filed by a human rights group amid rising popular opposition to the government's callous indifference towards the plight of the stranded workers.

Foreign Minister Pradeep Kumar Gyawali cynically told the court that the government was "assessing" the conditions of the migrant workers and would "fulfil our responsibility to ensure their welfare." While the stranded workers face rapidly worsening hardships, the minister requested that he be given 15 days to report back to the court.

Late last month Gyawali asked Kantipur Television: "What's the use of lockdown if the borders are open?"

When Kathmandu abruptly imposed its March 24

lockdown, which is still continuing, it made no serious efforts to ensure that the country's overwhelmingly poor population were provided with daily essentials, medicine and health safety equipment. The government has not provided substantial funds to assist Nepal's rundown and inadequate health infrastructure to cope with the pandemic.

Attempting to escape endemic poverty, over a million Nepalis live and work in India, most of them as low-wage day laborers. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's sudden national lockdown on March 24 drastically impacted on these low-paid workers.

An April 10 report in the *Wire* showed hundreds of migrant workers at the border town of Dhachula demanding to be allowed home. The article revealed that three workers were arrested by Nepali police and put into quarantine after they attempted to swim across the Mahakali River, which forms part of Nepal's western border with India.

Forty-five-year-old Indra Singh Khatri, who has worked as a mule handler for the past 20 years, told the *Wire*: "We are disappointed with our own government... I wanted to be with my family of five once the lockdown was imposed. [But] we could not even talk with our local representatives and government serviceman."

Another migrant worker Ramesh Bista, a bus driver for eight years, said: "Why do I have a citizenship card if my government won't make arrangements for me? [Is it] only for voting? I feel as if I'm not a Nepalese citizen."

The stranded migrant workers are fully aware of the coronavirus dangers and have not called for an unconditional opening of the borders.

"I also have a wife and children at home," Maha, another worker, told the media. "I don't want to give

them a disease—I will quarantine—but please let us come back to Nepal.”

Nepali migrant workers face appalling social conditions in India, toiling long hours and with harsh workloads, little free time, overcrowded accommodation—up to five people in a single room—and only limited access to the country’s rundown health facilities.

In emergencies, they have to use private healthcare providers and pay for it with loans from their employers or through charity. Their situation has worsened under the Modi government’s Hindu-chauvinist anti-immigrant campaign.

When the Indian government suddenly imposed its coronavirus lockdown measures, many Nepali workers attempted to walk to the crossing points on country’s 1,700-kilometre border with India.

On April 10, Nepali Prime Minister Sharma Oli, after discussions with Prime Minister Modi, said that both countries had agreed to take care of each other’s citizens stranded in the border areas. This so-called agreement, however, has not changed the situation.

Amnesty International has accused the Qatari government of rounding-up Nepali migrant workers last month. Police authorities declared that they would be tested for COVID-19 and returned to their usual accommodation. The workers, however, were imprisoned in detention centres in overcrowded cells without beds or bedding and not given enough food and water. The migrant workers, who were not paid their outstanding salaries, were then deported to Nepal before the lockdown began.

The Oli government, which speaks for the country’s tiny capitalist elite, has also abandoned the poor masses in Nepal. Like their counterparts throughout the Indian subcontinent, the most affected are the daily-wage earners who do not have any savings or any viable means of economic support.

On April 17, the *Kathmandu Post* reported that hundreds of daily-wage workers have returned to their home villages during the ongoing coronavirus lockdown.

“There have been numerous reports of people leaving the Kathmandu valley in droves to get back to their homes,” the newspaper stated. “Without public transportation, many are making journeys that are hundreds of kilometres long on foot. Images have

appeared on social media of people carrying babies, clad only in slippers, and laden with possessions, all walking home.”

On April 21, Nepal’s ministry for health and population reported that 42 people had tested positive for COVID-19. These figures are low because the country is not conducting systematic and widespread systematic testing throughout the country. Nepal has a population of 28 million but so far only 8,763 people have been tested for the virus. Nor is the government providing enough Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for health workers.

As one doctor at a Kathmandu medical college told the media: “By the time we confirm whether [patients] have been infected, the virus could infect many others in the hospital treating them, like myself.” He added: “If you don’t go to work, the medical college won’t give you a certificate.”

Another report said: “The PPE gown is improvised from thin plastic, and the goggles have been made from transparent stationery, while the helmet is fashioned out of elastic apparel material.”

To provide workers and the poor with the desperately-required testing equipment, PPEs, additional hospitals and other improved medical facilities in poverty-stricken countries like Nepal requires an international response. The global mobilisation of these necessary health and scientific must be advanced as part of the struggle by the working class for international socialism.



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