Disastrous impact of COVID-19 on Bangladeshi migrant workers

Wimal Perera
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Bangladeshi migrant workers in the Middle East and other regions have been hard hit by COVID-19 deaths and job losses as well as government and employer harassment in the countries where they are working. Those who have managed to return to Bangladesh are confronted with starvation, indebtedness and other miseries.

More than 10 million Bangladeshis, or about one in every 20 people from the country, are migrant workers. Bangladesh is sixth highest in the list of countries that send their workers overseas. More than three million are employed in the Middle East, including nearly two million in Saudi Arabia.

On December 31, the *Daily Star* reported that Bangladeshi migrant workers "topped the list when it came to infected persons" and that "by July 2020, more than 70,000 Bangladeshis were infected in 186 countries." On January 21, the newspaper revealed that a total of 2,330 Bangladeshi migrant workers had succumbed to COVID-19 in 21 countries as of December. A quarter of those who died from the coronavirus in Saudi Arabia were Bangladeshis.

The high number of COVID-19 related death rates among Bangladeshi migrants in the Middle East is mostly due to a lack of free access to proper healthcare. On January 20, the *Financial Express* quoted a Bangladeshi doctor working in Oman, who said: "We have seen Bangladeshi maids paying for health care from their own pocket unless they're fortunate enough to have kind and generous employers."

While countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE have free COVID-19 testing for all migrants, irrespective of their legal status, "undocumented" workers with coronavirus symptoms are reluctant to seek treatment, fearing they could be arrested and deported. As the *Daily Star* reported, in reality "[m]igrants in irregular status or those holding so-called free visas for all practical purposes remained outside the purview of health care that these countries were supposed to provide them."

Hit by the health and global economic consequences of the coronavirus, about 400,000 workers returned to Bangladesh between March and December last year, or between four and eight times higher than in previous years, according to the *Dhaka Tribune*. Thus, the number of Bangladeshi guest workers fell to around 200,000 last year, drastically down from previous annual averages of 700,000 and 800,000.

On January 29, the *Business Standard*, citing joint research by the Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM) and the Migratory Movements Research Unit (MMRU), reported that around 27 percent of Bangladeshi migrant workers lost their jobs and 26 percent more dropped to partial employment between April and July last year.

About 67 percent of Bangladeshi migrant workers who were forced to return home were not paid wages, and 62 percent had to leave behind savings and other assets. Last July, the Bangladesh High Commissioner in the Maldives admitted that many Bangladeshi migrant workers had not received outstanding wages and other payments from their employers.

Firoza Begum, a 40-year-old domestic worker in Saudi Arabia, lost her job because of the pandemic. She spent 14 years of her savings in order to get back to her village in Bangladesh's Patuakhali district. She had not been paid for six months.

Bangladeshi migrant workers are highly exploited and are often forced to work in dangerous and unsafe COVID-19 conditions. One study found that in Oman, Bangladeshi female domestic workers are paid on average only $234 per month compared to Filipino

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workers who receive $416, and Indian and Sri Lankan workers $312.

The low paid Bangladeshi workers are often harassed by unscrupulous agents. A female worker named Nazma, for example, was sent to Saudi Arabia through a local broker in December 2018 after they promised her a job at a hospital. According to her family, she was sent to a private house where she was allegedly tortured, sexually abused and killed.

The death of high numbers of Bangladeshi migrant workers was prevalent even before the pandemic outbreak. A February 25 editorial in the *New Age* reported that over 33,000 died between 2005 and 2017.

An article in the *Dhaka Tribune* revealed that the bodies of over 60 female workers were sent back home last year. One of the victims included 14-year-old Umme Kulsum who was allegedly tortured to death by her Saudi house owner in September. In February this year, six Bangladeshi workers were killed in a fire at a sofa factory opposite Heraz Marketat near the Saudi city of Medina.

The Hasina government has provided no relief for the thousands of migrant workers forced to return home who now face a range of financial problems and even starvation. Dhaka's response has been to try and impose the economic crisis produced by the pandemic on workers and the poor.

A BCSM and MMRU survey of 200 households in 21 Bangladeshi districts revealed that borrowings to cover disrupted remittance payments to guest workers' families constituted about 54 percent of household income between April and July. Prior to the pandemic, monthly household expenditure was on average 17,000 taka ($US200). This dropped to 7,300 taka between April and July, a 57 percent decline.

Firoza Begum explained, "We're surviving by taking loans from my relatives. I owe them about 150,000 taka but don't know how this money will be repaid."

The poverty confronting some of the returning migrant workers is so bad that many have had to return to their jobs overseas, despite the risk to their lives from COVID-19. Last September, hundreds of migrant workers demonstrated in Dhaka demanding Saudi Arabian Airlines provide them air tickets so they could to return to their workplaces in the Middle East.

The Hasina government, which faces declining remittances, falling garment exports and a collapse of tourist income due to the pandemic, is determined to boost the number of Bangladeshi migrant workers.

The *New Age* reported last month that garment export earnings in January 2021 were down by 5 percent year-on-year to $3.43 billion, compared with $3.61 billion in the same month of 2020. Garment export earnings from last July to January in the current fiscal year fell by 1.09 percent to $22.67 billion, down from $22.91 billion in the same period the year before.

In 2019, remittances from migrant workers amounted to $18 billion or around 7 percent of the country's GDP. Desperate to maintain this inflow, the Hasina government's foreign ministry is reportedly seeking to find jobs for Bangladeshi workers in "new labour markets," including Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda, Zambia, Tanzania and Libya.

Currently, the official number of Bangladesh coronavirus infections is over 550,000, with deaths approaching 8,500. These relatively low figures, however, are a gross undercount because health authorities are only testing about 13,000 per day, instead of the 50,000 recommended by the Hematology Department at Dhaka Medical College.

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