



The Plight of Asia-Pacific Migrants Stranded in Afghanistan

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Abstract: Nepalese and Filipino citizens are amongst those foreign nationals still trapped in Afghanistan where the Taliban seized power earlier this year, emphasising how the international community remains ill-equipped to face crises which escalate overnight, leaving the vulnerable without immediate aid.

The sudden though planned [withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan](#) after nearly 20 years of conflict was followed by the swift Taliban takeover in mid-August 2021. The Afghan people fear the re-imposition of some form of Sharia law will mean reversal of the [general freedom and advancement](#) made in the last two decades, especially regarding the rights of [women and girls](#). These concerns are shared by a

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number of international migrants, including some from developing Asia-Pacific countries, who remain trapped in the country as their governments struggle to repatriate them.

International/Asia-Pacific migrants in Afghanistan

As of mid-2020, Afghanistan was hosting [almost 144,000 international migrants](#) (52 per cent female, 41.4 per cent under 20 years old). In recent years, as a result of foreign presence in Afghanistan, humanitarian groups undertook several reconstruction and development initiatives and many migrants, including [Filipino](#) and Nepali nationals, moved to Afghanistan to utilise these opportunities. In addition to work in such initiatives, several Nepali nationals are also employed by various other countries' embassies and UN agencies in Afghanistan. Migrants working in multilateral agencies and diplomatic missions are repatriated under bilateral employer/employee agreements (and repatriation is also a condition of diplomatic law under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations), unlike other irregular migrants and those employed in local construction projects, where repatriation is more difficult.

In early 2021, there were almost 2,000 Filipinos living in Afghanistan; the number dropped over the months to 171 when the capital, Kabul, fell to the Taliban in August. The Philippine Foreign Ministry stated that there were around 42 Filipinos in Afghanistan awaiting rescue, as of mid-August 2021. This number reduced to around [18 Filipinos](#) by end of September: most of these were working for the international organisation Doctors Without Borders and chose to stay in the war-torn country.

[Nepal on the other hand](#), battling its own internal political instability and lacking diplomatic links and mechanisms with Afghanistan, is facing enormous hardship; firstly, in establishing how many of its citizens are in Afghanistan, secondly, in the subsequent evacuation process. A rough estimate from Nepal's Department of Foreign Employment indicates there were around 8,000 labour permits issued for Nepalis in Afghanistan in the last seven years, of which approximately 1,500 are currently valid. However, there remains no data on undocumented migrant workers. With irregular migration present in the region, it is hard for governments to identify and calculate the [exact number](#) of their nationals in different countries, making rescue operations all the more difficult.

Plight of trapped migrants

Most embassies are currently shut and transport in Kabul is restricted, exacerbating the obstacles for foreigners trying to access aid. Moreover, countries like Nepal and Philippines do not have embassies or consular presence in Afghanistan and are therefore fully dependent on other friendly countries to bring back their nationals.

If friendly nations do not or cannot help evacuate other foreign nationals, some countries, including Nepal, plan to wait until the security situation normalises in Kabul

before sending repatriation flights. For now, with [passenger flights out of Kabul airport suspended \(bar a few routes\)](#), [and the recent closure of a key border crossing by Pakistan](#), many remain trapped. The media is highlighting cases such as this [Indian migrant worker stranded in Kabul](#).

Difficulties for these trapped migrant workers are magnified due to the fact that many are relatively unskilled with few educational qualifications (by comparison with their skilled migrant counterparts, who are fewer in number and working mostly in civil society or development organisations). These unskilled migrant workers face language barriers, cultural differences and other problems integrating with host communities. Getting cash to them in Afghanistan is also currently problematic, given that [money transfer services](#) have been affected by the Taliban coup.

Relatives in the migrants' countries of origin, who relied on remittances they sent back, have now also lost their source of income. The plight of every stranded migrant worker affects a family back home, and, subsequently, the economies of their countries of origin.

Furthermore, many international migrants and their families on the ground in Afghanistan [share the same fears](#) as they are easily identifiable as 'foreign'. Consequently, their vulnerability and risk of potential exposure to human rights and protection violations while awaiting evacuation is heightened.

Human rights preparedness

Attention is directed towards the plight of Afghans embroiled in conflict, rights violations and how best to support them, but what about [international migrant workers on foreign soil](#) at such times? With most embassies and consulates shut and evacuation procedures ongoing, many of these migrant workers are isolated in various parts of the country, without support and communication. What becomes of these migrants and their families? Whom do they approach for help, aid and protection and how will they get back home?

The situation in Afghanistan is another wake-up call for the international community, emphasising how ill-equipped and under-prepared we are when such conflicts escalate overnight. Typically, we see help reaching embassies and skilled workers, but no similar effort or commitment when it comes to helping unskilled/irregular migrant workers, making us wonder if it is all a matter of the international community's priorities about whom to help, and when to help.

At a minimum, countries need to have the correct count and contact details of their nationals in Afghanistan in order to target aid and support within the country and ensure that those who want to return home are safely repatriated. Countries also need to negotiate with the Taliban regime to ensure that there are no human rights or protection violations facing stranded migrants.

At the same time, it needs to be acknowledged that the current volatile situation means that communication with relevant stakeholders may be delayed and some of these labour migrants could be left behind. Fast and reliable information-sharing via internet or community must thus be a priority to ease access to services including health and shelter. Countries without diplomatic officials or consular presence in Afghanistan should explore options of collaboration with embassies and missions active there. They must also reach out to other humanitarian organisations to request help supporting their nationals on the ground and subsequent repatriation efforts.

On a separate note, governments in the stranded migrant workers' countries of origin must take steps to help families suddenly deprived of the remittances they received from those workers. Repatriation of foreign migrant labour from Afghanistan may also swell the ranks of the unemployed in their countries of origin, in addition to rising pandemic-related job losses. Thus ongoing efforts to promote alternative job opportunities, reskilling and skills development in the context of COVID-19 must be extended to returnees from Afghanistan. Government and all other stakeholders, including international governmental and non-governmental organisations, must ensure enhanced social and economic inclusion in the return communities, including provision of psycho-social support.

International migrant workers must be kept at the heart of repatriation, reintegration and re-employment efforts.