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Unemployment, Infection Threaten Migrants Returning to Nepal



Hundreds of thousands of former Nepali migrant workers face extreme poverty and a resurgent coronavirus after being forced to return home, according to [Backward Society Education \(BASE\)](#) a leading advocate for labor and social rights in the midwest of Nepal.

A recent informal survey by BASE, a long-time AP partner, found that 199,003 migrant workers have returned to nine midwestern districts since May, only to fall prey to economic devastation and a chaotic government response to COVID-19.

The survey is further evidence that the pandemic falls hardest on those who already suffer from poverty, racism and discrimination. Most migrants in the midwest are from the Tharu, one of the most marginalized minorities in Nepal. The same poverty that propels Tharus to seek work abroad also forces their younger family members into domestic slavery and child labor, which are widespread in the midwest. [AP has supported BASE's efforts to free domestic slaves \(kamlaris\) since 2008.](#)

COVID-19 has dealt a crushing blow to the Tharu region, which depends heavily on remittances from migrants abroad. Before the pandemic, according to the World Bank, about 7.4% of all Nepalis worked abroad – more than twice the global average - and sent back \$8.1 billion a year. Over two million worked in India alone.

Most foreign workers live in appalling conditions, particularly in the Gulf states which use a sponsorship system known as *kafala* to deny migrants their rights. But abrupt expulsion is not the answer, particularly when accompanied by heartless incompetence back home.

Migrants began returning to Nepal in late May. Until the lock-down was lifted on September 17 they were required to spend two weeks in quarantine in unhealthy government-run shelters. “The disease is getting transmitted in the quarantine

centers,” reported BASE on June 24. “People are dying. They are not getting good food, proper care or timely treatment.”

With public transport halted, the former migrants then faced a nightmare journey back to their villages. Many came from mountainous districts and had to walk up to 600 kilometers without adequate food and water. **Many collapsed from exhaustion.**

Now, several months later, the former migrants face new peril from a virus that has been surging since the lock-down ended. Nepal currently ranks 35 on the global list with around 130,000 cases.

“There is no more quarantine and only a few isolation centers are operating,” reports BASE. “Everywhere is crowded. Hospitals beds are not adequate and patients are not getting proper care due to fear from transmission of covid-19. Health workers do not get PPE and other protective materials.”

BASE blames the chaos on a shortage of funds and poor coordination between the national, district and local government authorities. Municipalities have been granted greater autonomy by the new constitution but have little experience of actually governing.

Having worked abroad for so long, returning workers are ill-equipped to deal with the economic crisis. One former migrant worker, Birbal Chaudhary, 15, told BASE that he had earned 400 rupees a day (\$3.40) working in a brick factory in Majgaun district and was desperate to return to his former job.

But not everyone feels that way. Bikram Nepali, 17, spent seven months working on roads in Pyuthan district. He told BASE that he had “panicked” at the prospect of returning home because his family only grows enough food for 3 months and relied on his wages. Bikram has now regained his composure and plans to learn basic tailoring. “He is planning to work in his own village for 2 to 3 years,” reports BASE. “He is happy with his family.”



"I have no skills or income opportunities. I am jobless in my village." Girja Chaudhary, 27, worked on a construction site in Kathmandu before returning home to Dang District. Top photo: 199,003 workers have returned to the midwest of Nepal since May, mostly from India. (Photos by BASE).

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