

Migrants caught in crisis

Brian Kelly

A number of new initiatives point to ways in which the international community – particularly governments – could help reduce the vulnerabilities of migrant workers during conflict and crisis situations.

International labour migrants in a conflict zone are often more vulnerable than the local population. They may not speak the language or share the culture, lack knowledge of the geography of the country, and are often at the bottom of the economic pyramid. With no family or community networks to call on in times of trouble, their isolation is in stark contrast to, for example, the support given to fleeing Libyans by family members and by Tunisians. They fear both the immediate danger and the future negative impact that a change in their overseas employment situation will have on those who are dependent on their remittances.

As seen in the aftermath of the Libya crisis, the rapid return of large numbers of migrant workers to their countries of origin within a fairly short time has tremendous negative consequences in terms not only of lost foreign exchange earnings but also of increased unemployment. These returning migrants also quickly shift from being the primary provider for a family to becoming a dependant. This adjustment is often difficult and stressful for both the individual and his or her family. In addition, if – as is often the case – debts were incurred to secure the overseas work, the repayment of the debt becomes the responsibility of the entire family, putting additional financial pressures on the household.

How every country handled the return and reintegration of labour migrants during the Libya crisis depended primarily on the number of migrant workers involved and the resources available to the government. As the crisis in Libya worsened, the Philippines government managed to quickly mobilise the necessary funds and create structures to initiate the repatriation. It also worked closely with the Filipino community in Libya to disseminate information, mobilise and register migrant workers wishing to relocate, and to help in the actual evacuation and repatriation efforts. Furthermore, the Philippines had also long had legislation institutionalising the procedures and structures for responding to and managing such large-scale repatriation.

Other countries took a different route and funded international organisations, such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), to charter flights and handle the evacuation of migrant workers from Libya. Some others, such as Bangladesh and Chad, themselves provided charter flights in addition to financial contributions. There is no standard approach.

This crisis once again highlighted the vulnerabilities of migrant workers during conflict situations. These include the fear of being harassed or targeted by warring parties, the inability to cover travel expenses out of conflict zones, a lack of access to travel documents (since some employers keep the workers' passports to minimise contract defaults), a lack or limited knowledge of local languages, a lack of or limited access to embassy

officials (particularly in instances when embassy officials evacuated early) and a lack of knowledge about the transportation system and safe escape routes.

As highlighted earlier, forced evacuation commonly results in the return of a debt-ridden traumatised migrant worker to families dependent on remittances from abroad. Migrants returning to poor conditions back home are usually keen to re-migrate, usually to the country they have fled, given their sense of familiarity with the local environment.

The recent migration crisis in Libya is such a case. Repatriated migrants are willing and even eager to return there despite its instability. As early as 23 November 2011, 38 Bangladeshi migrants had returned to Libya to work, even as other migrants were still fleeing to Bangladesh.

The way forward

Governments and relevant organisations are already undertaking important initiatives to address these challenges. Below are some initiatives which could either be undertaken or expanded:

Develop standard operating procedures: In light of the Libyan crisis, during the April 2011 Fourth Ministerial Consultations of the Labour Sending Countries in Asia (known as the Colombo Process),¹ government delegates from the member states recommended the development of standing operating procedures (SOPs) for the protection of migrant workers in complex emergencies. SOPs provide for the necessary institutional structures and contingency planning required in order to address similar situations in the future. More specifically, SOPs include detailed information on in-situ protection measures, relocation, and evacuation and repatriation procedures, with an emphasis on coordination among the various stakeholders.

The Philippines government, for instance, has long recognised that supporting its citizens working abroad during crisis is critically important and in the nation's best interest. During the Libyan crisis, the Philippines created an Overseas Preparedness and Response Team under the office of the President. The team was tasked with, among other things, formulating and periodically reviewing contingency plans in times of crises affecting Filipinos overseas.

Create an emergency trust fund: The Colombo Process member states also recommended establishing a formal funding mechanism to ensure a rapid and structured response, as an alternative to the current flash-appeal process following a humanitarian crisis. Few labour-sending states have the standing capacity to evacuate and repatriate their nationals from a conflict zone as quickly as necessary. While IOM and its partners can respond rapidly to a crisis, the inconsistency of donor

responses results in inefficient mobilisation. Funding gaps have previously jeopardised the continued repatriation of migrants from conflict zones. Ensuring the human security of migrants requires a more stable funding stream, not solely dependent on donors' altruism or their desire to mitigate the likelihood of irregular migration.

Offer micro-insurance to migrants: Migrant workers are often unprepared to deal with emergency situations – such as personal illness and injury, natural disasters or political upheaval – in the destination country. If employers close their businesses and leave, migrant workers typically have no means to support themselves. Over the past decade, migrant insurance schemes have spread with success throughout Latin America and South and Southeast Asia. There are also examples of social insurance, as in Sri Lanka, where social insurance schemes are a permanent feature of the migration process. Social insurance schemes are sponsored by governments for specific population groups, whereas micro-insurance schemes are provided by private agencies for migrants and their families.

Train migrants in contingency planning: Most migrant workers are unaware of the risks and hardships associated with migrating abroad before they depart. While various awareness campaigns and pre-departure orientation programmes in recent years have aimed at raising awareness on various topics from financial literacy to host country cultural norms, the topic of emergency crisis planning is rarely included. Migrants need to be aware of the types of risks they may encounter (especially in the case of sudden political upheaval and conflict) and what steps they can take to ensure their safety.

Build embassies' capacity to protect labour migrants: A number of labour-sending countries, such as Bangladesh, Pakistan and the Philippines, have designated labour attachés within their respective embassies to provide assistance and welfare. Such officials are trained in various issues relating to migration such as counter-trafficking, facilitating remittances, and registering and responding to complaints. Increasing their awareness of existing mechanisms and institutional responses to

crises would enhance their capacity to protect migrants, whether in situ or during relocation, evacuation and repatriation. Labour attachés should be the first point of contact for distressed migrants and be responsible for disseminating information to migrant communities, especially during emergencies. Special attention should be given to unaccompanied minors and women migrants, who are always at higher risk.

Develop post-return and reintegration plans:

National and international actors need to consider long-term rehabilitation strategies for migrants forced to return, such as by providing job opportunities at home or abroad. For instance, several countries, including Bangladesh, have made it mandatory for all returnees to register upon arrival at the airport. Even though no reintegration plans existed during the Libyan migrant crisis, Bangladeshi immigration officials registered migrants to ensure that the government had a full list of returnees, including their contact details. The information collected proved extremely useful when the Government of Bangladesh later obtained a loan from the World Bank to reimburse IOM for some of the repatriation costs and to provide each returnee with a one-time cash grant.

Brian Kelly bkelly@iom.int is the Regional Emergency and Post-Crisis Advisor for Asia and the Pacific, International Organization for Migration. www.iom.int

1. www.colomboprocess.org

