SITUATION OVERVIEW

BORDER MANAGEMENT DURING COVID-19

The Thai Government closed all major border checkpoints with Cambodia on 23rd March 2020, causing thousands of Cambodian migrant workers to rush back to the country over the fear of being stranded in Thailand. To date, nearly 120,000 migrants have returned to Cambodia from overseas, with reports that many more will arrive once the borders re-open.

In mid-July 2020, the Thai authorities have decided to open selected checkpoints to transport goods between Thailand and Cambodia. Only trucks which can carry up to two passengers (who are screened for COVID-19 symptoms) are allowed to enter Thailand.

Like Thailand, Lao People’s Democratic Republic in March closed its border checkpoint along the border shared with Cambodia to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Both countries only share one international checkpoint located in Stung Treng province and Laos’ Champasak province.

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CAMBODIA COVID-19 CRISIS

In May 2020, IOM Cambodia, together with the Central Department of Border Police of the General Commissariat of National Police (GCNP), conducted a rapid needs assessment with the frontline border police officials at both the official and unofficial POEs between Cambodia and Thailand to investigate the challenges since the COVID-19 outbreak and their training and support needs. Based on the assessment, IOM and the GCNP and the General Department of Immigration (GDI) developed a training plan for the frontline border police officials at both the international and local Points Of Entry on Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to increase their capacity to effectively respond to the COVID-19 challenge in their role of facilitating border-crossing movement of the returning migrants. The IOM Regional Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for frontline border officials at the Point of Entry in Response to COVID –19 Outbreak were translated into Khmer, printed and distributed among the frontline border police officials during the training. The training sessions took place in September and October 2020. Wide adoption of SOP will be crucial in improving the readiness of GDI and GCNP frontline border officials for the re-opening of borders, to ensure they follow a health compliant approach to border management when the numbers if travelers and migrants increase.

Cambodia has three types of official Border Crossing Points (BCP) - international, bilateral and local BCPs. International BCP: they are managed by the frontline border officials of the General Department of Immigration (GDI) for cross-border economic and social activities of Cambodian people and people from different countries using all sorts of bilaterally and internationally accepted travel documents. Bilateral BCP: bilateral BCP exist only on the border between Cambodia and Viet Nam and Cambodia and Lao PDR. Bilateral BCP are managed by the LBPP officials for cross-border social and economic activities of only the citizens of the countries in the bilateral agreement. The travel documents used at the bilateral BCP include passports, border passes (with Lao PDR only), and national ID cards. Bilateral BCR exist only between Cambodia and Viet Name and Cambodia and Lao PDR. Local BCP: Local BCP are managed by the LBPP officials for cross-border social and economic activities of the local border areas’ residents using day cross-border tickets and border passes (with Thailand and Lao PDR only) and the national ID cards (with Viet Nam only). Military BCP: Cambodia has one military BCP; which is the O’Bei Choin Military BCP. This is the unique BCP and it only exists in the Banteay Meanchey province. Unofficial POE are the pathways across the borderline that are commonly and unofficially used by the cross-border village residents to access goods and services that are close to their place of residence.
COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the urgent needs in terms of WASH infrastructure at the border crossings. IOM Cambodia to date has donated five hand-washing stations to three Points of Entry (Poi Pet, Obei Choin, Malai) in Banteay Meanchey province. A new water tank of 5,000L was installed at O’Bei Choin POE to provide water supply for toilets and handwashing facilities for returning migrants. Information, Communication and Education materials regarding handwashing were delivered to Doung POE. Two handwashing facilities were set up at the O’Smach POE for migrants to wash their hands upon arrival at the reception center for health screening and COVID-19 awareness.

In terms of remaining priorities, the accessibility of toilet facilities for returning migrants is an ongoing issue at POEs. Many POEs have toilets for border officials only, and migrants and travelers should use separate facilities to help prevent spread of COVID-19.

Trough IOM interventions, there has been progress on the provision of handwashing facilities at POE, however, it remains insufficient considering the increased numbers of migrants and travelers when the borders in the region re-open. More effort will also be needed to promote good hygiene habits and encourage the adoption of COVID-19 preventive measures both by frontline officers and migrants.

Currently, there are no current measures to disinfect luggage. Regular cleaning and disinfection of frequently touched surfaces, equipment, devices, WASH facilities, desks, chairs, computers, keyboards with alcohol based wipes/sprayers or chlorine-based solution is needed at POE but currently under supported, both in terms of equipment provision and capacity of the frontline border officers. In preparation for border-reopening, stockpiling of PPE and hygiene materials (cleaning kits, waste bins, paper towels etc.) combined with capacity trainings should be supported to those POE and border officers, who have not been yet support by IOM.
EMERGING NEEDS

The urgent need is to expand activities to cover the under supported POEs on the Cambodia–Vietnam and Cambodia-Laos land borders and airports and seaports in Cambodia, which are resuming international passenger traffic, but need further support in terms of COVID-19 preparedness and response. IOM Cambodia has now trained over 700 frontline border officers on SOP and PPE. However, both GDI and GCNP national police trainers indicated there at least 2,000 officers who would benefit from SOP and PPE at the POEs between Cambodia and Viet Nam and Lao PDR. With a regional office in Bangkok and operational presence in all Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) countries, IOM is ideally placed to foster and advocate for cross-border cooperation to strengthen standardization of border procedures for trade and passenger traffic.

Despite the land border crossing being closed, there have been reports of migrants crossing at unofficial POE, often involving illegal recruiters. There is an increased risk of vulnerable migrants being exploited and trafficked due to their worsening economic situation, highlighting the need for more robust safe migration measures.

October has brought heavy rains and flooding which has impacted the safe return of migrants from Thailand. O’Beicho POE in Beantey Meanchey has been under water in October, resulting in the frontline officers having to be moved to a safe ground. As many as 350 migrants per day return through this POE using boats or swimming across. The boat transportation has to be paid on the Thai side, which may result in migrants being stranded in Thailand, if they cannot afford the boat fee.

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