



Haris Coussidis / ICRC

# MIGRATION: OUR WORK IN ASIA



ICRC

The ICRC uses a deliberately broad description of migrants, which includes all people who leave or flee their country of origin or habitual residence to go abroad to seek safer or better prospects. This description includes refugees and asylum seekers, who have special protection under international law.

## Background

More than 244 million people around the world were migrants in 2015.<sup>i</sup> In 2015, 75 million of them lived in the Asia Pacific region, and 104 million – over 40% – originated from the region. A significant proportion of migrants from South and South-East Asia (especially Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Myanmar, Pakistan, the Philippines and Viet Nam) work as labour migrants in the Gulf countries and Malaysia.

Among the region's migrants, the UN Refugee Agency counts 3.5 million refugees, mostly from Afghanistan and Myanmar. While 96% of all Afghan refugees worldwide live in neighbouring Iran and Pakistan, 2015–2016 saw a considerable increase in the number of Afghans arriving in Europe.

Returns of migrants to their countries of origin, such as to Myanmar from Thailand, to Afghanistan from Europe and Pakistan, and to Indonesia from the Gulf countries and Malaysia, are also taking place. Climate-induced migration in Nepal, Bangladesh and the Pacific islands is a growing phenomenon but is difficult to quantify at this stage.



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## What we do



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### Using our Restoring Family Links network to help migrants

In the Asia Pacific region, migrants may lack the means to call their families, forget or lose phone numbers, be detained or find themselves otherwise unable to get the support they need to reconnect with their loved ones, who are left waiting in anguish for answers. Through a range of services, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in the region try to help prevent migrants and their families losing touch in the first place, and help them restore and maintain contact if they do, as well as striving to find out what happened to missing migrants.

The ICRC has worked with the National Societies in Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka to produce information leaflets for migrants with key messages on how to stay in touch with their families and what to do if they lose touch. The leaflets are distributed to people before they leave – in their communities, at the airport or during pre-departure briefings for migrant workers. In 2016, the Pakistan Red Crescent also ran community information sessions at known departure points.

## Supporting National Societies' work

### THE NUMBERS

In 2016, the Bangladesh Red Crescent helped almost 300 returnee migrants reconnect with their families through phone calls upon their arrival in Dhaka.

In August 2016, the Indonesian Red Cross, with ICRC support, enabled more than 40 Sri Lankan migrants to call their families when they reached the shores of North Sumatra by boat.

Families in Bangladesh and Myanmar looking for a loved one in Thailand or Malaysia may be able to contact either the Bangladesh Red Crescent or the ICRC in Myanmar to open a tracing request. Several unaccompanied Bangladeshi minors returning from Malaysia were reunited with their families in 2016 thanks to the concerted efforts of the ICRC and the Bangladesh Red Crescent.

### TRACE THE FACE

Launched in 2013, the Trace the Face website enables people to post pictures of themselves online and to display them on Red Cross posters in some European countries to help them find their missing relatives. More than 40,000 people visit the website every month, and dozens of missing people have already been found.

In Afghanistan, the ICRC and the Afghan Red Crescent have stepped up their efforts to trace relatives of Afghan migrants in Europe using pictures from the Trace the Face website. The ICRC has received over 700 requests from people looking for a family member, mostly from Afghans abroad. For more information, please go to: [www.tracetheface.org](http://www.tracetheface.org)

## Providing humanitarian forensic support

Treating the dead with dignity and notifying their families are matters of great humanitarian concern. Our forensic teams help local forensic authorities and institutions to improve their methods for recovering, handling, documenting and identifying the bodies of migrants who have lost their lives. We encourage cooperation between regional forensic services and other organizations in order to share and promote forensic best practices.

We maintain regular contact with forensic organizations and experts in countries such as Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, notably the Asia Pacific Medico-Legal Agencies network and the Indo-Pacific Association of Law, Medicine and Science. In 2016, the ICRC organized a regional workshop on the management of the dead in disasters, with a focus on managing and identifying the remains of deceased migrants.

In Afghanistan, the ICRC has started collecting basic ante-mortem data from missing migrants' relatives in order to assist the Greek forensic authorities' efforts to identify the many deceased migrants recovered on Greek shores and notify the bereaved families.

## Helping vulnerable migrants...

### ...to start over

In the first half of 2016, the ICRC provided hygiene kits to around 7,500 Filipinos returning home from Malaysia.

### ... to get health care

In Bangladesh, two 50-bed health facilities in Cox's Bazaar offering obstetric care, simple elective surgery and general inpatient and outpatient services are supported by the Bangladesh Red Crescent and the ICRC. These joint health-care initiatives provide care for all those in need. In addition, the ICRC's role goes further: we train the medical staff, supply medicines and upgrade the infrastructure.



## Working in immigration detention

In the Asia Pacific region, migrants are detained for entering or remaining in a country without the necessary authorization or documents (so-called irregular migrants). Asylum seekers and refugees are often considered to be irregular migrants and are also arrested and detained.

We engage with States as part of a dialogue urging them to use detention only as a last resort and to always consider liberty and alternatives to detention first.<sup>ii</sup> We visited migrants held in a variety of detention facilities in Malaysia, Myanmar, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

During these visits, and through our confidential dialogue with the authorities, we seek to make sure that the principle of non-refoulement<sup>iii</sup> is upheld, and that migrants are afforded due process of law, treated

humanely, held in conditions that preserve their dignity, and are able to maintain contact with the outside world – their families and consular authorities – if they wish to do so.

### THE NUMBERS

The Malaysian Red Crescent and the ICRC provide phones for detained migrants to call their families, helping 2,200 detainees to do so in 2016 alone.

Between mid-2015 and the end of 2016, the Indian Red Cross collected over 650 handwritten Red Cross messages from detained migrants, and delivered almost 350 replies.

In 2016 in Myanmar, the ICRC collected 120 Red Cross messages from migrants in detention and delivered them to their relatives abroad. Together with the Myanmar Red Cross, we also delivered over 100 messages to the families of migrants detained abroad. In Thailand in 2016, over 800 phone calls and short oral messages were made or delivered, and over 100 Red Cross messages were collected from detained migrants.

### Improving health care in detention

The ICRC donated essential medical equipment to six immigration detention centres in Malaysia in 2016 to support their curative and preventive health services and treatment for detainees. In Sri Lanka, 420 migrants in detention received hygiene kits distributed by the Sri Lankan Red Cross with ICRC support.

## What we say

### Talking to governments

We engage the authorities in confidential dialogue to ensure that they fulfil their legal obligations so as to protect the lives, preserve the dignity and alleviate the suffering of vulnerable migrants.

### Influencing the debate

The ICRC seeks to influence the debate on migration policy by drawing attention to issues of humanitarian concern in multilateral regional forums, including the Asia Pacific Roundtable, the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime, and dialogue with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' multinational police force (ASEANAPOL).



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<sup>i</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs

<sup>ii</sup> ICRC policy on immigration detention: <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/migrant-detainees-icrc-policy>

<sup>iii</sup> The principle of non-refoulement prohibits the transfer of people to places where there are substantial grounds to believe that they would face violations of certain fundamental rights, such as torture, ill-treatment, persecution and arbitrary deprivation of life.