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CARAM Asia Statement

Migrant Workers, Refugees and their Families need to be Included in the COVID-19 Response

No Migrant and Refugee Must Ever Fear Or Be Prevented From Visiting A Hospital To Access Health Care!

CARAM Asia and its forty two (42) member organizations in eighteen (18) countries across Asia are concerned over pre-existing vulnerabilities for migrant workers in many migrant's receiving countries. The world is currently under the grip of the corona virus outbreak and World Health Organization (WHO) has made the assessment that COVID-19 has been characterized as a global pandemic with rapidly increasing number of cases in many countries. Affected countries are taking drastic measures such as lockdown and temporary restrictions of movement, including entering and exiting countries. Health ministries are advising for washing hands, wearing masks, social distancing, postponing events, meetings and activities that bring groups of people together. Governments are also shutting down public and private institutions in a limited manner. Health authorities are scrambling to provide medical care to those infected and contact trace those who have come in close contact with the infected.

In this emergency situation, migrants working and living in cramped quarters with poor ventilation, fearful of authorities, with limited mobility, language barriers, and

fear of losing wages or being laid off, are all factors that contribute to migrants' vulnerability in facing the COVID-19 pandemic. Foreign domestic workers face a significant risk of contracting the coronavirus from their employers in receiving countries and lack access to healthcare. Many are not even told where their employers travel to in order to assess the risks involved.

Refugees, especially living in refugee camps and urban squalor, have no or very limited access to health care. In some cases they do not have facility to call the health services and may lack access to clean water to wash their hands.

Lack of access to accurate information in their own language on preventative measures such as taking the basic health care precautions like social distancing or even proper washing of hands with soap, makes them increasingly susceptible. There is virtually no chance to use "social isolation" for migrant workers who may suspect or be diagnosed with COVID-19. And what about receiving benefits from social security or any social safety net for workers whose place of employment closes down, even if only temporarily? Will there be a chance to access unemployment benefits? The majority of migrant workers are the breadwinners for their family. How can they continue to support their families, kids and even sick parents or spouse back home with loss of income? They will face extreme financial hardships which will increase their vulnerability to infection as well as exploitative conditions. Normally, migrant workers obtain 40% of their salaries via over time work. What happens when that is cut? Migrants who are already in debt bondage will be unwilling to return home until their debts are paid off. Migrants lack a security net but have urgent need to be allowed to stay in their destination countries.

Due to various vulnerabilities as mentioned above; most likely migrant workers and refugees will be affected badly because of Covid-19 outbreak. Migrants often are unaware that they have the same universal healthcare rights as citizens, and some are afraid to come forward, fearing their immigration status and other documentations might be checked by the authorities. Many migrants cannot

access local health care facilities in receiving countries, unless they pay premium rates for the service or have existing health insurance. With low salaries, their financial capacity to cover health care costs is limited. Hence, they are challenged in accessing appropriate health care.

Therefore CARAM Asia and all partners strongly recommend and demand that:

- There is urgent need for a comprehensive response to be in place that respects human rights and dignity of migrants and refugees and includes them in the current financial and health planning of the pandemic response.
- Governments must take preventive measures via messages in various languages which migrants and refugees can understand.
- No migrant and refugee must ever fear or be prevented from visiting a hospital to access health care.
- Testing and treatment for all persons of concern, regardless of documentation status must be given with impartiality.
- Employers must pay full salaries to migrant workers according to prevailing labour laws, throughout the shutdown, without deductions.
- Governments must make arrangements for safe repatriation of all migrants (and their families) who are languishing in the Immigration Detention Centres with technical help and monitoring by International Organization on Migration (IOM). This will reduce the risk dramatically of foreigners and even locals especially detention officers in Malaysia and other receiving countries in the event any detainees contract the COVID19.

CARAM Asia (Coordination of Action Research on AIDS and Mobility) is a regional network of 42 organizations in 18 countries across Asia and has Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. The statement issued by: CARAM Asia Task Force on Migration Health and HIV (MHH).