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**Covid-19 in the Gulf
Special Coverage**

**The Covid-19 Pandemic:
Vulnerability of Migrant workers in the GCC States
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The Covid-19 Pandemic: Vulnerability of Migrant workers in the GCC States

Md Mizanur Rahman

Introduction

The six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates) contain some of the highest numbers of migrants of any country in the world. Estimated at as many as 28 million, the migrants living in the region remit roughly US\$ 110 billion to their home countries annually. As the global Covid-19 crisis unfolds, the GCC countries face an unprecedented challenge of containing the spread of the disease among nationals and residents in the region. Since the movement of people is a primary driver of virus spread, the GCC states have imposed measures to restrict such movement, including lockdown. The idea is to ensure social distancing so as to avoid person-to-person infection. However, migrants in Gulf countries live primarily in labour camps or crowded dormitories which are hotspots for Coronavirus spread. Migrants are therefore highly exposed to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Spread of Covid-19 in the GCC States

The first case of Coronavirus reported from the Gulf region was in UAE on 29 January 2020. As reported on the [WHO Covid-19 dashboard](#), as of 22 April 2020 the virus has infected 31,459 people and killed 190 in the six GCC countries: Saudi Arabia (11,631) has the highest number of Covid-19 patients, followed by UAE (7,755), Qatar (6,533), Kuwait (2,080), Bahrain (1,952), and Oman (1,508) (Table 1). With the rising rate of infection, a few GCC countries have even tried to repatriate workers, but amid the pandemic the home countries were unwilling to take them back. The UAE has said it would [review labour ties with states](#) who refused to repatriate their citizens after the ambassadors of India and Pakistan said their countries were not prepared to do so. However, Qatar, for example, has practiced a more inclusive Covid-19 pandemic management policy, taking care of everyone in the country, nationals and residents alike.

Table 1: Cases of Coronavirus in the GCC Countries

Country	Total confirmed cases*	Total deaths*
United Arab Emirates	7755	46
Saudi Arabia	11631	109
Qatar	6533	09
Oman	1508	08
Kuwait	2080	11
Bahrain	1952	07
<i>Total</i>	<i>31459</i>	<i>190</i>

*As of 22 April 2020. Source: website of the World Health Organization

Initiatives taken in the GCC

All six GCC countries have taken steps to ensure the protection of workers within their borders. The UAE has emptied a number of buildings to accommodate migrant workers. Bahrain is rehousing low-income migrant workers in closed schools to avoid the spread of the virus in their overcrowded accommodation. Saudi Arabian companies have asked migrants to stay at home. In Qatar, there are reports of hundreds of cases of infection within the labour centers, and Qatar has already isolated the infected workers and initiated a lock-down in those areas.

Saudi Arabia has announced that the kingdom will cover all the treatment costs of any Covid-19 patient in the country, including foreigners. Further, a package of \$2.4 billion has been announced to support citizens working in the private sector who are facing financial difficulties. UAE has passed new regulations to empower companies to provide paid and unpaid leave and cut wages either temporarily or permanently for noncitizen employees. Across the country, mobile testing centers have also been launched as part of the UAE's rapidly expanding testing program.

Bahrain has turned a covered car park near the capital [Manama into an intensive care unit with 130 beds](#) for infected patients, as a precautionary measure in case of a significant rise in cases of Covid-19. Oman has also implemented a number of measures to restrict the virus spread: many locations of migrant congregation, such as currency exchange offices, have been closed, and there has been an announcement that all government offices will work with 30 percent staffing.

Almost all the countries in the GCC have enforced strict measures and issued stay-home orders, but reports suggest that many non-essential activities such as construction are still ongoing, and this may result in increasing the virus spread.

The initiatives of Qatar include free testing and medical treatment for all; financial support to businesses through a [fund of \\$824 million so that salaries continue to be paid on time](#); ensuring safe living and working conditions for all; and public awareness campaigns on prevention and control measures. All this suggests that Qatar has adopted a more worker-centric approach than some other Gulf States. Overall, on policy, every GCC country has taken steps to lessen the impact of Coronavirus and protect people living in their territory; however, on the specific issue of non-nationals there is still a need in many Gulf States for a more protective approach. A review of ongoing media reports indicates that the GCC countries have primarily attempted to restrict the spread of Coronavirus and have paid less attention to workers' problems such as food, wages, and healthcare.

Issue of irregular migrants

Even more importantly, the Gulf states also host large numbers of irregular workers. According to Shah (2009), 10 to 15 percent of workers in each GCC state are irregular and lack the documentation to avail themselves of [healthcare benefits](#). These irregular workers are exceptionally vulnerable to the Covid-19 pandemic because they do not have access to many of the benefits that are extended to regular migrant workers. Irregular migrant workers in the six GCC countries

urgently need food and shelter. Philanthropists in the GCC countries already champion the cause of providing humanitarian aid to needy people across the globe; given the gravity of the problem, regional humanitarian organizations as well as individual philanthropists should extend their support to irregular migrants by providing them with food and shelter in this time of pandemic.

Conclusion

There is no country in the world whose healthcare infrastructure has not been shaken by the Covid-19 pandemic. Even the OECD countries have struggled with the pressure of healthcare needs and the rising death tolls caused by the new Coronavirus. It is important to recognize that the GCC states have shown substantial resilience in keeping the virus at bay. If workers' basic necessities, which include food, shelter, and healthcare, are taken care of now, then there is a reduced chance of further virus spread, and better prospects of life returning to normal soon.

About the author

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About the Gulf Insights series:

The "Gulf Insights" series is published by the Gulf Studies Center on a weekly base with the aim to promote informed debate with academic depth. The Gulf Insights are commentaries on pressing regional issues written by the

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