



UPDATE ON THE COVID-19 SITUATION FOR MIGRANT WORKERS AND BUSINESS RESPONSES IN THAILAND

1 February 2021

SUMMARY

This brief provides information and context complementary to other ongoing reporting (such as the CSO Coalition for Ethical and Sustainable Seafood in Thailand situation update shared by Oxfam and others which provides in-depth information and recommendations), based on Issara Institute's worker voice channels and relationships with employers in Thailand. Its purpose is to share these additional perspectives for Issara's partners and others, and provide context on actions that can be taken by our partners. This brief builds on previous Issara reporting on [responsible workforce reduction during COVID-19](#) and email updates on risks for undocumented and other vulnerable workers.

The first signs of Thailand's January 2021 coronavirus outbreak began in the shrimp market and *Srimuang* apartment next to it in Samut Sakhon, the large industrial province west of Bangkok that is home to large processing factories and around 500,000 Burmese migrant workers. The government sealed off the market and apartment, where migrant workers lived in dense close quarters. This led to immediate needs for basic food and other essential supplies for survival among some 4,000 migrants, who found themselves locked in by barbed wire fencing. Some food was provided by companies, international organizations, and civil society, but this initial period was concerning.

The government is maintaining separate infection data between Thais and foreign migrant workers, and top government officials have hinted that foreign migrants are to blame for this outbreak. But how the virus got to the shrimp market in the first place is still undetermined. Factories in provinces with high infection numbers in Samut Sakhon are having all their workers tested. In early January 2021, for example, Thai Union tested more than 23,000 of their workers and found 69 positive cases¹ - and workers have reported additional cases since to Issara, with those testing positive or having exposure then being reportedly quarantined in a factory run site, government run site, or hospital. Pattaya Foods tested some 4,000 of their workers and found 900 positive cases; this factory was shut down. Per the January CSO Coalition situation report and government reporting, COVID-19 infections have now expanded to a total of 16,221 reported cases as of 28 January 2021. On 1 February 2021, the government informed companies located in a specific area (Tasai) of Samut Sakhon they need to restrict worker movement to only between the factory and accommodation (or have onsite accommodation) or shut down for the month of February 2021.

¹<https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-thai-union/seafood-producer-thai-union-says-operating-normally-after-69-covid-19-cases-idUSL4N2JH18V>



ISSARA INSTITUTE'S ROLE AND RESPONSE

This emergency situation has required a response at many levels. At the ground level, Samut Sakhon-based civil society organizations or those with a presence there, such as Raks Thai, MWRN, Confederation of Trade Unions of Myanmar (CTUM), Foundation for Educational Development (FED), World Vision, and others have been working hard to provide critical medical and humanitarian assistance to affected workers, in coordination with the Thai public health department and some in coordination with Thai employers. The Bangkok-based Issara team is playing a unique and complementary role, hearing from thousands of workers a month through its established worker voice channels, and also having working relationships with many seafood, electronics, and other businesses based in Samut Sakhon. Issara Institute has been in contact with many seafood processing and canning factories throughout the emergency situation, as well as non-seafood businesses in the vicinity, and is supporting ongoing employer-employee communications in the region, particularly those within the supply chains of our Strategic Partners. This includes directly supporting supplier communications with workers, promoting updates and health and safety information through our worker voice channels in multiple language, and directly supporting workers with remediation of issues they have raised. Issara is also continuing our unconditional cash program for vulnerable workers, such as pregnant workers, as well as coordinating with civil society groups by providing updated information and promoting their published recommendations.

THE MAIN ISSUES: COSTS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The updates presented below detail the main issues raised by workers through our worker voice channels and remediation support, and are based on this ongoing communication and verification with workers and Thai businesses in the seafood, electronics, and apparel and footwear industries. The main issue within nearly all of these concerns revolve around issues of safety and costs, and who is taking clear responsibility to prioritize the health of migrant workers. Mixed business responses have resulted in a lack of communication but also a lack of accountability in:

- Ensuring workers take on no costs in having appropriate PPE – despite many precautions, the policies of some employers have resulted in limited PPE both for work and for any required quarantine by workers.
- Covering the costs of COVID-19 testing – with some employers requiring but not covering the costs of tests needed to return to work or to take paid sick leave to quarantine.
- Payment of wages for workers in quarantine – workers have reported some companies have clearly announced that if a worker is required to quarantine, they will receive wages as usual. However, in some other companies, workers have not received clear communication on what would happen with their wages, even though they are being required to quarantine. Some companies are requiring quarantine be taken as medical leave for 14 days, which requires a medical certificate but should also be treated as paid sick leave.



- Avoiding exploitation of undocumented workers and their families. These workers are now able to apply for work permits, find employers, and regularize, but the process is often complicated for them and costs are not often being covered by new employers.

HUMAN RIGHTS, LABOUR RIGHTS, AND PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUES RELATED TO TESTING AND QUARANTINING

The focus of the Thai Government and industry has in many cases been containment and not the health and human security of quarantined workers. Foreign migrant workers have reported being tested but not notified of their results, creating very distressing situations at both the individual and group level. Some workers reported being notified that they tested positive, but because they were asymptomatic they were not separated from other COVID-negative workers forced into quarantine – provoking a lot of anxiety amongst all workers forced into quarantine, while also exhibiting extremely poor compliance with public health measures. Workers seem to be unaware of the national COVID hotline 1422, which the Issara team is broadly promoting through its different worker voice channels.

Workers have recently raised issues around the conditions of quarantine centers as well, both those set up by their employers and by the government (workers often may not know what type of center they are at), including appropriate cleanliness, spacing, and quantity and quality of food provided. The picture at right shows a quarantine center in Samut Sakhon with appalling conditions – no social distancing measures, no isolation of infectious persons, and inadequate privacy, cubic content of air, ventilation, comfort in terms of sufficient bedding, and sunlight, among other minimum standards.



HUMAN RIGHTS AND HUMAN SECURITY ISSUES RELATED TO THE MOST VULNERABLE WORKERS

The government has pleaded with employers to not terminate foreign migrant workers, and banned the transport of migrant workers across province lines. Recently, the government has opened registration for all undocumented migrant workers, whether they have an employer or not, in an effort to control their movement and thereby stop the spread of the virus. Thus, all migrant workers



are being permitted to extend or register for work permits into 2021, whether or not they were previously documented. Issara has helped workers and employers navigate this process, which allows workers to safely regularize ongoing employment, switch employers, or find employment, and allows many companies to fill workforce gaps either due to the effects of COVID-19 and quarantine, or to an inability to recruit migrant workers due to closed border and recruitment. Still, other ongoing monitoring since then has revealed how some workers have lost employment and been abandoned – especially by employers who had been using undocumented workers and who feared blame and prosecution.

Issara Institute has been providing unconditional cash support throughout the pandemic specifically to vulnerable workers, including stranded and pregnant women who have been furloughed or lost employment or wages. These efforts have been supported by our donor Laudes Foundation, and we have further appealed to partners for funding to continue this direct support in addition to information, counseling, and remediation and referral via our worker voice channels. Following the initial lockdown in Samut Sakhon, cash support has allowed migrant workers further security and empowered them to address their most pressing basic needs in the most expeditious manner possible.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUES RELATED TO THE PROVISION OF PPE TO WORKERS

Many businesses have clearly communicated measures they have taken since the COVID-19 outbreak, including social distancing, wearing of personal protective equipment (PPE), shift break arrangements to reduce the traffic in the common areas, limiting movement within the factory, and separating and clustering the workforce. On a positive note, many workers have noted their factories are enforcing strict COVID-19 prevention measures, and some workers have reported receiving regular and clear communication on how to protect themselves. However, other workers expressed not receiving clear guidance or information about what to do during this time, and/or what measures the employer would be taking, or if testing would be required, and if so whether such testing would be facilitated by the employer or government.

Some employers have publicly shared information on their response, and on small amounts of humanitarian aid they have provided to the migrant worker community.² Some of this information has been verified by workers calling the worker voice channels, while other information has been revealed to be exaggerations or mis-information, revealing deeper risks to workers – and also demonstrating the value of large-scale worker voice. For example, one major seafood processing company reported that they are providing PPE to all workers, but workers in the factory reported that they were actually only being provided with only one paper mask per week (while at the same time being asked to double mask), and having to spend their own money for additional PPE to stay



protected while working on the factory line. Some workers also voiced their concern because they were still working closely together on the production line, which they saw as a high risk of being infected.

CONCLUSION

As noted, the CSO Coalition and Oxfam situation report provides a good set of recommendations for all stakeholders that Issara Institute also supports, and they have asked to highlight the most urgent for global brands and retailers.

For employers/suppliers:

- Clearly communicate with workers, ensure no worker is required to pay costs related to testing or quarantining, and ensure that all workers continue to receive regular wages, including COVID-negative workers who may not be sick but who are forced to quarantine.

For global brands, retailers, and importers:

- Refrain from “cutting and running” from a supplier, and commit to continuous improvement with suppliers and joint remediation with local stakeholders if COVID-19 cases or labour abuses are found in workplaces;
- Commit to provide funding to support suppliers to handle the COVID-19 pandemic and systemically improve working conditions of workers in their supply chains;
- Make public the specific measures they are undertaking to support the workers in their supply chains, providing regular, periodic updates on their progress; and
- Urgently update your company’s Statement on Human Rights, Supplier Code of Conduct, and contracts to reflect the emerging risks and challenges posed by COVID-19 on their suppliers.

Issara will continue to leverage our worker voice channels reaching hundreds of thousands of workers to provide updated information and support to workers in their native languages, and coordinate with employers on needed support in communications to workers. Issara Institute is available to support all of our partners in ensuring updated policies and continued communication with suppliers on these issues, and will continue to report on and support remediation of worker-reported issues. In most cases, suppliers are willing to discuss the steps they are taking, but at a broader level or only when specific cases are raised to them. Issara Strategic Partners can expedite these discussions by incorporating and encouraging communication with Issara into any ongoing discussions to check-in or support suppliers.