

MMC Asia

QUARTER 1 2020



# Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Asia

This Quarterly Mixed Migration Update (QMMU) covers Southern and Southeast Asia. The core countries of focus for this region are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Thailand. Depending on the quarterly trends and migration-related updates, more attention may be given to any of the countries over the rest.

The QMMUs offer a quarterly update on new trends and dynamics related to mixed migration and relevant policy developments in the region. These updates are based on a compilation of a wide range of secondary (data) sources, brought together within a regional framework and applying a mixed migration analytical lens. Similar QMMUs are available for all MMC regions.

The Mixed Migration Centre is a global network consisting of seven regional hubs and a central unit in Geneva engaged in data collection, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration. For more information on the MMC, the QMMUs from other regions and contact details of regional MMC teams, visit [mixedmigration.org](https://mixedmigration.org) and follow us at [@Mixed\\_Migration](https://twitter.com/Mixed_Migration)

### **MMC's understanding of mixed migration**

"Mixed migration" refers to cross-border movements of people, including refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, victims of trafficking, and people seeking better lives and opportunities. Motivated to move by a multiplicity of factors, people in mixed flows have a range of legal statuses as well as a variety of vulnerabilities. Although entitled to protection under international human rights law, they are exposed to multiple rights violations along their journey. Those in mixed migration flows travel along similar routes, using similar means of travel - often travelling irregularly, and wholly, or partially, assisted by migrant smugglers.

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# Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Asia

## Quarter 1 - 2020

### Key Updates

- **Mass returns of Afghan refugees and migrants:** An estimated [200,000 refugees and migrants](#) returned to Afghanistan in March, primarily from Iran, raising concerns over the spread of COVID-19 and putting pressure on Afghanistan's [weak health systems and economic infrastructure](#).
- **Migration trends reverse as Bangladeshis return home from India:** India's controversial Citizenship Act has provoked fears of [detention, deportation, and statelessness](#) for India's Muslim population as well as Muslim migrants from countries such as Bangladesh. Fearing increased discrimination, many migrants began returning to Bangladesh using [brokers, often at high expense](#), to facilitate their irregular journeys.
- **Continued concerns over marriage migration from Cox's Bazar:** Rohingya women and girls are reportedly continuing to utilize marriage to facilitate secondary movement from Cox's Bazar to [Malaysia and Indonesia](#), where Rohingya men are offering to pay in exchange for marriage.
- **Central Asian countries to address statelessness:** New laws passed in [Tajikistan](#) and [Uzbekistan](#) allow stateless people to apply for citizenship.
- **First climate change asylum claim recognized:** In its ruling on the first climate change asylum case in New Zealand, the [UN Human Rights Committee stated](#) that countries should not deport individuals who face climate change-induced conditions that violate the right to life.
- **Concerns over the impact of COVID-19 on refugees and migrants:** Across Asia, the socio-economic and health implications of COVID-19 have already been far-reaching, with worries that [refugees and migrants](#) may be disproportionately affected in the face of systemic barriers to accessing healthcare and other essential services.

## Regional Overview



\*Information on the map relates to selected updates and does not represent all mixed migration flows within and out of Asia.

# Mixed Migration Regional Updates

## Mixed migration from Asia

### Refugees and migrants return en masse to Afghanistan

This quarter saw [hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees and migrants](#) returning both voluntarily and involuntarily to Afghanistan. In particular, there was a dramatic spike in returns from Iran as Afghanistan's neighbour juggled [escalating tensions with the US](#), as well as a severe [COVID-19 outbreak](#).

Additionally, during the quarter, [several European Union countries](#) continued to carry out deportations to Afghanistan, despite increasing COVID-19 risks and political upheaval, including [a contested presidency](#), the [potential collapse of peace talks](#) and the [ongoing investigation into alleged war crimes by the Taliban, Afghan and international armed forces](#). On March 19, 2020, the Afghan Ministry for Refugees and Repatriation stated that they [no longer could receive or support the high number of Afghans deported from European countries](#). As a result, and in light of the COVID-19 crisis, EU-led deportations were temporarily stopped at the end of March.

Despite a large number of returns, Afghan refugees and migrants continue to remain the highest population group in refugee camps on the Greek Islands, accounting for [49% of the total number of refugees and migrants](#).

### Intensifying struggles for refugees and migrants at the EU's external borders

On March 1, Turkey [reopened its borders](#) to Europe after Russian-backed Syrian troops killed 33 Turkish soldiers. [Thousands of refugees and migrants](#) gathered at the Turkey-Greece border, hoping to cross into the EU. Provoking heavy criticism, [Greece deployed troops who fired tear gas and water cannons](#) into crowds of refugees and migrants trying to cross the border. At least [three people were killed and 240 injured](#) with thousands more left waiting in limbo, unable to cross the border.

On March 6, the EU praised Greece for acting as a "[shield](#)," announcing millions of Euros in support for Greece to strengthen their land and sea borders further. Simultaneously the EU launched a one-month scheme offering refugees and migrants [EUR 2,000](#) for returning to their home countries.

Both Greece and the EU's response to the situation has led to moral and legal compromises that are [deadly and undermine many values](#) European countries espouse. Further, through its response, the [EU is compromising its reputation](#) in effectively managing the ongoing crisis by continuing to place lives at risk and broker effective and human rights-based solutions.

## Greece tightens immigration policy amid rising anti-migrant sentiments

[Inhumane conditions](#) and mistreatment of refugees and migrants in the Greek Island camps continued to be of critical concern this quarter. In February, Greece deployed military force using teargas to [disperse migrants and refugees protesting](#) the worsening conditions on Lesbos.

In a bid to tighten its borders, Greece announced a proposal to construct [a floating barrier](#) in the Aegean Sea to prevent irregular maritime entry from Turkey to Greece. In March, the Greek government also announced it would [temporarily suspend asylum applications](#) for a month and relocate [574 refugees and migrants](#) who arrived on Lesbos after March 1 to a detention facility north of Athens, pending deportation.

This heavy-handed approach is set against the backdrop of escalating hostilities towards refugees and migrants across the country with [anti-migrant protests](#) being held on the islands of [Lesbos, Samos, and Chios](#). Island officials and residents stated that they were [no longer prepared to host thousands of asylum seekers](#) after five years on the frontline of the European migration crisis. As a result of the protests, migrants and refugees have reported threats of violence from [vigilante groups](#) on the Greek islands.

## Mixed migration within Asia

### Bangladesh eases education restrictions on Rohingya children

This quarter, the Bangladesh government confirmed that it would lift a long-standing restriction preventing Rohingya children, aged [11-13](#), from accessing education. Cox's Bazar is currently hosting to nearly [400,000 school-age Rohingya children](#) who were previously barred from accessing formal education both inside and outside of the camps. The lifting of the ban is a positive step in avoiding the children in the camps becoming [a lost generation](#). The government of Bangladesh has also announced it will consider easing education restrictions for children above 13 years old in the future.

### Migration trends reverse in light of India's new Citizenship Act

India's controversial [Citizenship Act](#) passed in December 2019, resulted in [riots](#) as well as fears of [detention, deportation, and statelessness](#) for the more than [170 million](#) Muslims living in the country. Near three-day-long riots occurred in New Delhi, leading to a death toll of at least [45](#) and the widespread destruction of a Muslim neighborhood.

Since early 2020, increased discrimination of Bangladeshi migrants in light of the Act has prompted ["reverse migration" trends](#) back to Bangladesh. Typically, many Bangladeshis have migrated to India through irregular channels for low-skilled work. Thus, many lack official documentation, resulting in having to engage the services of costly brokers to facilitate return in response to fears of being [identified and prosecuted](#).

## Continued marriage migration of Rohingya women and girls from Cox's Bazar

This quarter saw the movement of Rohingya women and girls leaving over-crowded refugee camps in Cox's Bazar for arranged marriages. Reportedly the main destinations are [Malaysia and Indonesia](#), where Rohingya men can pay in exchange for marriage. Men once dominated secondary movements from Cox's Bazar to Malaysia and Indonesia, yet [women and children are increasingly undertaking these journeys](#).

The protection risks and casualties on these routes remain high. On January 21, [22 Rohingya refugees, mostly women](#), were detained by police attempting travel to Malaysia. Not long after, on February 11, [15 Rohingya women and children](#) drowned after their boat to Malaysia capsized off the coast of Bangladesh. These tragic events highlight the need for durable solutions for Rohingya populations as the crisis becomes more protracted, persecution continues in Rakhine states, and living conditions worsen in Cox's Bazar.

## Myanmar: Escalations of violence in Rakhine despite ICJ ruling

On January 23, 2020, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that Myanmar must ["take all measures within its power"](#) to prevent the genocide of its Rohingya minority. The Gambia brought the case to the ICJ [in November 2019](#) on behalf of a coalition of Muslim countries, requesting an investigation of Myanmar for crimes of genocide.

Despite the ICJ ruling, reports show that the situation in Rakhine has continued to [escalate](#). On February 3, the Ministry of Transport and Communication of Myanmar re-imposed a [mobile internet shutdown](#) in some parts of the state for three months. Meanwhile, according to independent experts of the Human Rights Council, the heavy use of weapons led to the displacement of [1,100 people, including from Rohingya and ethnic Rakhine](#) in February. Further, the Myanmar army was accused of launching mortar shell attacks at civilians resulting in death and the injury of [20 children at a school](#).

During the quarter, Myanmar also continued to apprehend refugees attempting to leave Myanmar, considering them to be doing so "illegally." Since 2015 Myanmar authorities confirmed they had arrested more than [2,200 Rohingya](#) trying to flee the country. This quarter, [Myanmar continued to prosecute Rohingya](#) who attempted to flee the country, including children.

## Australia continues to violate international human rights law

In February 2020, the International Criminal Court (ICC) condemned Australia's [costly](#) offshore detention regime as [cruel, inhumane and unlawful](#) and a breach of international human rights law. Since 2013, Australia has pursued a controversial offshore processing regime sending refugees and asylum seekers to detention centers in Papua New Guinea (PNG), Nauru and Christmas Island.

Despite the [US resettling around 700 refugees](#) as part of a bilateral deal with Australia, and over 1,000 evacuated for [medical treatment](#) to Australia, [hundreds still remain](#) in increasingly precarious situations. During this quarter, [leaked photos](#) of PNG's immigration detention facilities, revealed inhumane and crowded living conditions for the asylum seekers currently held there. High numbers of [self-harm and](#)

[suicidal ideation amongst detained asylum seekers also continue to be reported](#). Refugees, now living in the country's capital, Port Moresby, also face continued [dead threats and violence](#) from local populations, raising concerns over their wellbeing and safety.

## Central Asian countries' contribution to ending statelessness

On January 7, 2020, [an Amnesty Law](#) came into effect in Tajikistan, allowing foreign nationals and stateless people with irregular status to regularize their stay by obtaining residence permits. Soon after that, a provision in Uzbekistan's [Citizenship Law](#) was signed, conferring citizenship granted to registered stateless people in Uzbekistan.

Like other Central Asian countries, stateless people in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan consist of displaced populations emerging from the collapse of the Soviet Union. The new policies were welcomed by UNHCR, who stated that the measures would benefit some [20,000 people](#) who came to Tajikistan before the end of 2016 and [some 50,000 stateless](#) people who registered in Uzbekistan before January 1, 1995.

## UN Human Rights case opens the door to climate change asylum claims

On January 21, 2020, in the first ruling of its kind, the [UN Human Rights Committee has stated](#) that countries could not deport individuals facing climate change-induced conditions that violated the right to life. The case featured Ioane Teitiota, an asylum seeker whose application in New Zealand was denied, leading to the deportation of his family to Kiribati. He argued that New Zealand violated his right to life since the sea level rise and other climate change effects had rendered Kiribati uninhabitable for all its residents. Despite the [Committee denying Teitiota's appeal](#), the wording of the judgment leaves the door open for future examination of climate change asylum matters.



# Thematic Focus: Mixed Migration Dimensions of COVID-19

This quarter saw the unprecedented emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had tragic impacts on healthcare systems and economies around the world.

## COVID-19 as a risk multiplier

The COVID-19 crisis is a risk-multiplier, exacerbating existing inequalities, and likely affecting those already in vulnerable situations the worst. Grave concerns have been raised regarding the spread of the virus in [less-developed countries, including in Asia. Many people, including refugees and migrants, lack access to](#) adequate healthcare and social services, and live in crowded conditions, without access to appropriate sanitation and running water. Amongst those populations potentially most affected are [refugees and migrants](#), who already face barriers to accessing healthcare and other essential services due to their non-citizenship, fear of [persecution](#) and [language and cultural barriers](#). These barriers are expected to only [worsen](#) in the face of the pandemic.

## Widespread loss of livelihoods for migrants leads to destitution and returns

COVID-19 related global lockdowns have [devastated economies](#) in Asia and around the world, leading to the loss of livelihoods for many, including refugees and migrants working in the informal sector. The widespread closure of factories and the [suspension of construction-related work](#) has left large migrant populations without income in Southeast Asia. In Thailand, this quarter, all but essential services were closed, in an attempt to suppress the spread of the virus. Alongside the announcement of imminent land-border closures, job losses resulted in a mass exodus of around [60,000 migrant workers](#) to Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Myanmar by mid-March.

Similarly, Afghan migrants in Iran faced widespread job losses as the country closed all non-essential businesses in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. This led to an estimated [200,000 refugees and migrants](#) returning from Iran in the second half of March alone. With only [600 of the 200,000 refugees and migrants](#) tested for COVID-19 after crossing the border, there are fears that the virus will spread further, putting pressure on the [100-bed hospital](#) designated to quarantine COVID-19 patients in Afghanistan.

## Grave concerns for those living in camps

Concerns exist for refugees and migrants living in [overcrowded conditions without access to sanitation and running water in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic](#). On the Greek islands, where refugees and migrants are already [unable to address essential health and safety needs](#), news of a confirmed COVID-19 case in mid-March has sparked fears of a [potentially devastating outbreak. These concerns are set to the backdrop of increasing tensions and restricted access to doctors and aid workers' in the camps](#).

Likewise, the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh in late March, [worrying](#) hundreds and thousands of refugees living in crowded and unsanitary conditions in the nearby camps. In addition, the continued internet shutdown in both Rakhine state and Cox's Bazar has made it "[virtually impossible](#)" to spread awareness of COVID-19 prevention measures on a large scale.

These concerns come as the tightening of border security, and almost complete cessation of international flights has led to the [suspension of refugee resettlement](#). European border restrictions may also [affect the plans to transfer hundreds of children](#) from Greek islands to other EU countries.

## Heightened vulnerabilities of those in immigration detention

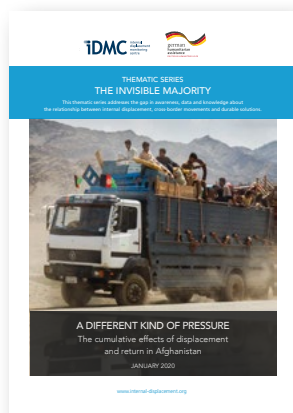
People in immigration detention, like other incarcerated populations, are at a heightened risk of COVID-19 due to [overcrowded and unhygienic conditions](#) as well as the inability to practice physical distancing and self-isolation. Furthermore, refugees and migrants in immigration detention centers frequently do not receive [adequate health care even under normal circumstances](#). In an Australian detention center in Brisbane, an [immigration guard tested positive](#) for COVID-19, prompting fears for the health and wellbeing of people detained inside. Meanwhile, hundreds of refugees and asylum seekers held in Sydney's Villawood detention center have signed an [open letter to Prime Minister](#) pleading for their release amid concerns they are at significant risk of an uncontrollable outbreak.

## Good practices bring hope

Amidst the pandemic, communities have galvanized into action in attempts to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to refugee and migrant populations. In Cox's Bazar, [a network of women volunteers](#) helped set up isolation units in hospitals and educated children about hygiene measures possible in the camps. In Malaysia, the UNHCR and Rohingya community leaders stepped up to get refugees who potentially contracted the virus [free testing](#). Similarly, UNHCR, in coordination with the [government of Iran](#), announced that it would ensure all migrants and refugees would receive free access to primary healthcare services and are included in the national COVID-19 response.

Civil society actors across Asia have also quickly mobilized to advocate for policy and program supports for refugees, and migrants at risk of COVID-19 and its political effects, in particular, to ensure the [inclusion](#) of refugees and migrants in preparedness and response plans.

# Highlighted New Research and Reports



## [A different kind of pressure: The cumulative effects of displacement and return in Afghanistan](#)

### **IDMC | January 2020**

Displacement in Afghanistan is both a historical and contemporary phenomenon. One in four Afghans have been displaced, and conflict triggered 372,000 new internal displacements in 2018. Attempted peace talks have failed to prevent civilian casualties from reaching unprecedented levels. Despite this bleak picture, however, more than 3.3 million Afghans have returned from abroad since 2012.

This study, based on a non-representative survey with 120 displaced Afghans in Kabul, Herat and Nangarhar provinces, examines the relationship between internal displacement, cross-border movements and durable solutions in Afghanistan.



## [Quality and rigor in TIP research in the Mekong region: Assessing the evidence base](#)

### **USAID | January 2020**

The research review was conducted by NEXUS Institute for the USAID Asia Counter Trafficking in Persons (USAID Asia CTIP) project. 480 TIP studies in the five countries, published between 2008 and 2018, were identified and analyzed. Overall the body of TIP research reviewed was of uneven quality and robustness. While there were many high quality studies and reports on TIP in the five countries, there were also studies and reports that were less technically and/or ethically robust. Identifying issues and challenges in research quality is

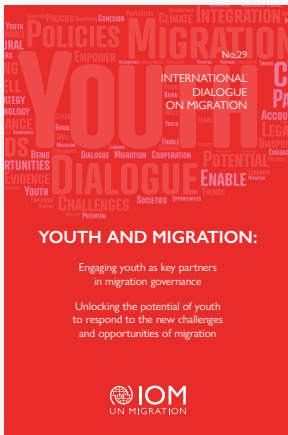
critical in improving the TIP evidence base in the Mekong region. Addressing the key findings will enhance the collection of technically robust and ethically rigorous TIP research and program data.



## [Innovative approaches for the management of labor migration in Asia](#)

### **ADB | February 2020**

This 2020 edition, “Innovative Approaches for the Management of Labor Migration in Asia,” has four chapters and two statistical annexes providing a comprehensive comparative analysis on international labor mobility in Asia. It contains major outcomes and key lessons from the Ninth Roundtable on Labor Migration in Asia, held in Tokyo on 24–25 January 2019.



## [Youth and migration: Engaging youth as key partners in migration governance](#)

**IOM | February 2020**

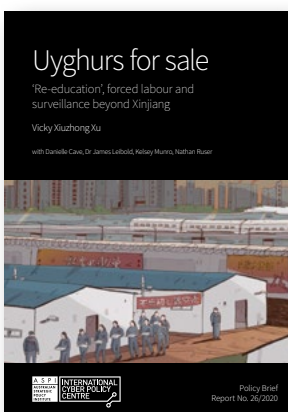
This report outlines initiatives and projects that show what can be done when young people are actively involved in conversations. It offers a fresh perspective on migration, and tells us that, while more work will be needed, the future is young and, with migrants, can be bright.



## [Unprepared for \(re\)integration: Lessons learned from Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria on Refugee Returns to Urban Areas](#)

**DRC/IRC/NRC | February 2020**

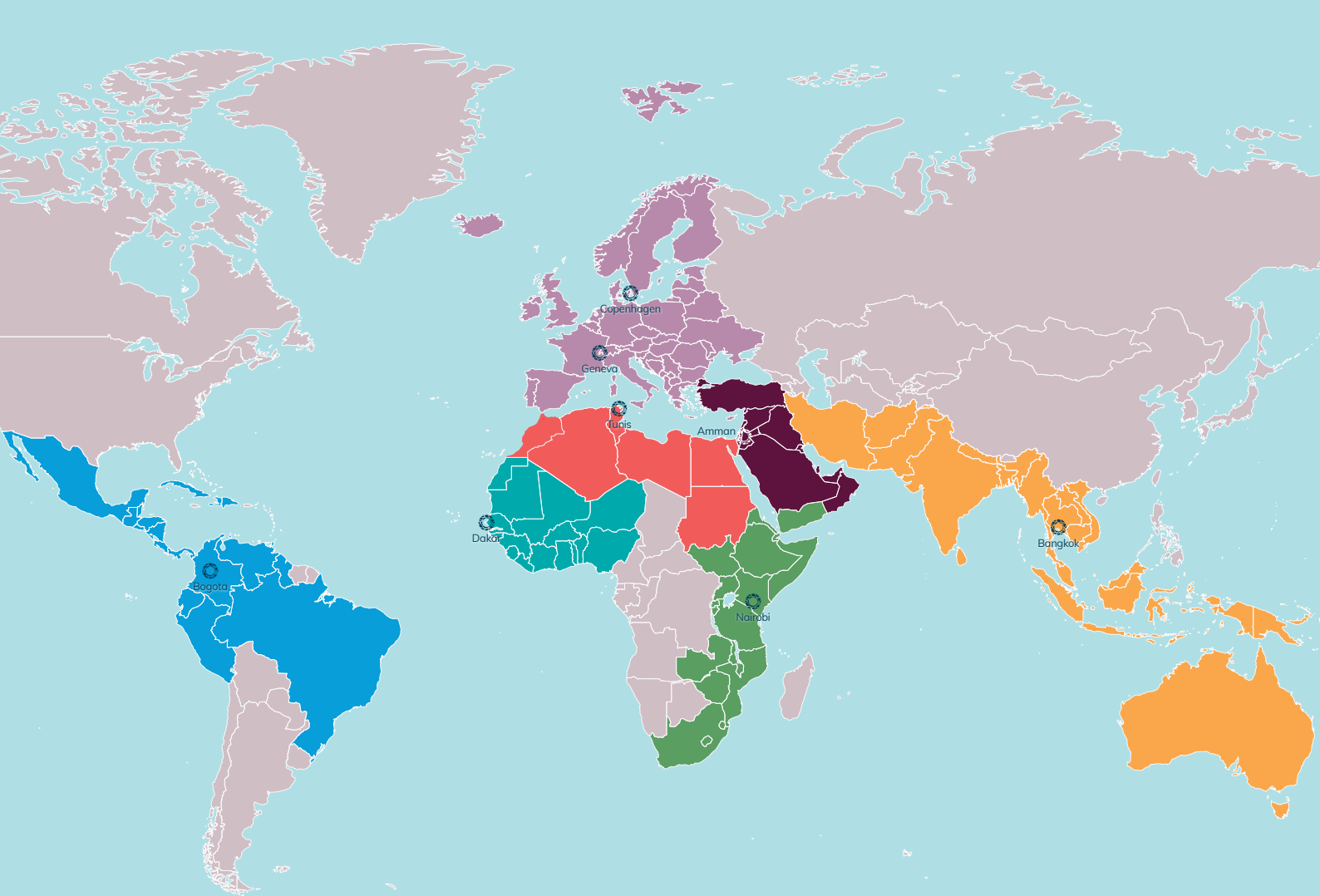
This study informs programming and policies in relation to refugee returns and, specifically, with regards to their (re)integration within urban areas, with a focus on Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria. While millions of refugees return to poverty, conflict and insecurity in all three settings, a tunnel focus on returns rather than on (re)integration has limited value for long-term planning. Stakeholders, including communities and returnees themselves, have been unprepared for what happens post-return



## [Uyghurs for sale: Re-education, forced labor and surveillance beyond Xinjiang](#)

**ASPI | March 2020**

This report examines case studies in which Uyghur workers appear to be employed under forced labor conditions by factories in China that supply major global brands. In one case study, a factory in eastern China that manufactures shoes for US company Nike is equipped with watchtowers, barbed-wire fences and police guard boxes. Another case study uncovers an eastern province factory claiming to supply sportswear for multinationals Adidas and Fila, where evidence suggests that Uyghur workers were transferred directly from one of Xinjiang’s ‘re-education camps.’



The MMC is a global network consisting of seven regional hubs and a central unit in Geneva engaged in data collection, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration. The MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise on mixed migration. The MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. The MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

The MMC is part of and governed by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). Global and regional MMC teams are based in Amman, Copenhagen, Dakar, Geneva, Nairobi, Tunis, Bogota and Bangkok.

**For more information visit:**

[mixedmigration.org](https://mixedmigration.org) and follow us at [@Mixed\\_Migration](https://twitter.com/Mixed_Migration)

