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SMUGGLING IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

The impact of the pandemic on
human-smuggling dynamics and
migrant-protection risks

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Cover photo: Migrants wait in line for lunch at a migrants camp on the outskirts of the city of Bihać in Bosnia and Herzegovina, November 2019.
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SUMMARY

Efforts to counter the COVID-19 pandemic have seen unprecedented restrictions on movement being imposed in many countries, both at borders and within countries. Some communities and policymakers have adopted increasingly hostile attitudes towards migrants, whom they perceive as contagion risks. Barriers to movement are therefore not only state-imposed but can also be community led.

While these measures are reducing migration and the smuggling business in many regions in the short term, they are also heightening migrant-protection risks. Such measures are also likely to swell the profits of the smuggling industry in the medium term. COVID-19, and the measures introduced to control it are likely to increase

the drivers for movement; the vulnerability of migrants at any point in their journey; the militarization of borders; and the further reduction of safe and legal routes.

As the policy environment becomes more hostile to migration, the operating risks and prices of smuggling look set to rise. This may drive out operators with a lower risk appetite and attract organized-crime groups, who are more likely to exploit migrants for ever greater profit.

To avoid emerging into a post-pandemic landscape characterized by a dramatically more severe migrant crisis and a more lucrative and professionalized smuggling market controlled by organized crime, it is key to monitor and mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on migrants and refugees throughout the pandemic.



THE IMPACT OF COVID-19: A WARNING FROM MOZAMBIQUE?

On 31 March 2020, Mozambique joined a growing number of countries across the world responding to COVID-19 by closing its borders to foreigners. Goods were still permitted to cross, but the non-essential movement of people was prohibited.¹

Prior to the full border closure, on 20 March, the Mozambican government had imposed strict border controls to prevent any unnecessary movement of people.² On 24 March, 78 Ethiopian migrants were crammed into the container of a goods lorry by smugglers attempting to move them into Mozambique across the northern border with Malawi. Alerted by noises from inside the container, Mozambican immigration inspectors opened it and found the dead bodies of 64 migrants, along with 14 survivors.³ It is believed that the migrants and refugees were being smuggled along the popular southern route towards South Africa. All survivors were tested for COVID-19 by the authorities before being detained.

Analysts note that Mozambique's COVID-19-driven border closure will force any migrants crossing into the country to take a similar approach, i.e. using the services of smugglers and concealing themselves in containers.⁴ 'This is really the only way to get large numbers of people across the border and through check points,' comments Joe Hanlon, a journalist and academic who has been closely monitoring dynamics in Mozambique for more than a decade.⁵

**The Ressano Garcia/
Lebombo border crossing
between South Africa and
Mozambique.**

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This incident is a grim reminder of the horrendous risks faced by migrants concealed in containers, a method that smugglers around the world have turned to as risks of detection increase. As noted in Issue 6 of the Global Initiative's East and Southern Africa Risk Bulletin, this tragedy echoes the reports

of mounting migrant fatalities across the Sahel, North Africa and Europe.⁶ The incident may be only the first warning sign of the greater risks migrants are prepared to take to overcome border restrictions imposed during COVID-19, and the extreme danger they face in doing so.



Some 64 migrants were found suffocated in a container in Mozambique in March 2020. There were 14 survivors, photographed here by officials moments after they were rescued. © Fungai Caetano



INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented restrictions on movement being imposed around the world to curb the spread of COVID-19 are posing new challenges to migrants and refugees. This will affect both those who continue their journeys and those forced into immobility mid-transit, who will become increasingly vulnerable to contagion, destitution and exploitation.⁷ These restrictions are also having significant, widespread and potentially lasting consequences for the dynamics of human-smuggling markets, with serious implications for the protection risks that irregular migrants and refugees face on their journeys.

While it is impossible to know for certain how many irregular migrants use the services of smugglers, it is increasingly recognized that the majority of the world's 30 million migrants will have used the services of smugglers at some point in their journey.

Estimating the global revenue generated from smuggling is problematic, given how difficult it is to measure. However, in 2017 the International Organization for Migration estimated that the illicit industry was worth US\$10 billion per annum globally.⁸ Europol called smuggling the 'fastest growing criminal market in Europe and other regions' in 2015, and stated that the trend was set to continue.⁹

Political discourse construing the fight against COVID-19 as a 'war' is growing. Restricting or halting human movement – COVID-19's key containment 'tactic' – is a key part of the battle, while epidemiological contact tracing is another crucial 'weapon'. Irregular and clandestine movement erodes the efficacy of these measures, making it difficult to establish a comprehensive picture of exposure or contain the spread of the virus. In this context, it is no surprise that the military is being deployed

**Bira migrant reception
centre in Bihać, Bosnia
and Herzegovina.**

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in many countries to restrict the domestic movement of individuals and strengthen border controls. Migration policy and discourse, shaped by the need to control an unprecedented global pandemic, is also increasingly being framed through the lens of national security. Untracked human movement becomes the enemy of states fighting this public-health disaster.

Prior to the pandemic, the securitization of the migration landscape was shown to drive migrants' reliance on smuggling networks and increase protection risks on the migrant trail. New evidence points to the exacerbation of these trends by COVID-19-driven securitization. Currently, some smugglers have been reluctant to operate out of fear of contagion, resulting in a pause in irregular movement, but this situation is likely to be only temporary. In the medium term, the policies to control COVID-19 are likely to increase the drivers for movement (such as spiralling unemployment); the vulnerability of migrants at any point in their journey; the militarization of borders; and the further reduction of safe and legal migration routes. As the policy environment becomes more hostile to migration, the operating risks and prices of smuggling will rise. This may drive out operators with a lower risk appetite and attract organized-crime groups, who are more likely to exploit migrants for ever greater profit.

The COVID-19 crisis may also have longer and more insidious consequences for both the perception of and protections afforded to migrants. By definition, the transnational activity of migrants is antithetical to the current strictures against population movement. Migrants have been stigmatized in some areas as potential carriers of the virus, with some communities actively opposing their presence. Such stigmatization could potentially harden into longer-lasting antipathy towards migrants that persists

beyond the end of the COVID-19 crisis, potentially eroding the raft of protections afforded to migrants and refugees under international and domestic laws. Alternatively, a depleted domestic workforce could make some countries more welcoming to migrants to fill labour shortages.

While recognizing the unprecedented demands made on policymakers by the ever-shifting COVID-19 landscape, it is key that states urgently address the plight of refugees and migrants in COVID-19 planning. Overlooking the concerns of this group could heighten the risks of a humanitarian disaster, not only for migrants and refugees, but also for the world at large, given that this group is crucial for the global efficacy of COVID-19 pandemic responses. Considering the needs of migrants at this juncture is also critical to prevent organized crime from exploiting the crisis and further entrenching itself in global migration dynamics.

To avoid emerging into a post-COVID-19 landscape characterized by a dramatically more severe migrant crisis and a more lucrative and professionalized smuggling market increasingly controlled by organized crime, it is key to monitor and mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on migrants and refugees throughout the pandemic.

This brief draws on information shared by our networks and civil-society partners in the field around the world and on a comprehensive review of reporting on the impact of COVID-19 on the human-smuggling industry and irregular-migration dynamics. We conclude this brief by using preliminary evidence to anticipate the post-COVID-19 migration landscape and outline a set of recommendations to support policymakers to respond and prepare for the immediate and future impact of COVID-19 on the human-smuggling market and migrant-protection risks.



UNDERSTANDING HUMAN SMUGGLING

Despite playing a major and growing role in irregular migration, the smuggling of migrants remains poorly understood.¹⁰ Human smugglers are best perceived as service providers who, for a fee, help migrants to cross boundaries and overcome barriers, which may be geographic, political or cultural.¹¹ The harder the barrier is to cross, or riskier the operating environment, the more professionalized the smuggler must be to succeed. Often, this means that organized crime tends to enter the smuggling market in contexts where the migration landscape is more securitized. This typically also means levels of violence against migrant increase.¹² Given the current hardening of political and cultural barriers against movement, smuggling (and organized crime's role in this market) is set to play a pivotal role in both the pandemic and post-pandemic landscapes.

Armed soldiers of the Niger National Guard protect a convoy crossing the Sahara from Niger to Libya.

© Scott Peterson/Getty Images

A key distinction: human smuggling and human trafficking

While repeatedly elided in public discourse, it is important to distinguish between 'the smuggling of migrants' and 'human trafficking', which are distinct crimes under international law. Human trafficking consists of three elements: (i) an 'action', being recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons; (ii) a 'means' by which that action is achieved (threat or use of force, or other forms of coercion, e.g. abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or a position of vulnerability)

and the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve consent; and (iii) a 'purpose' – namely, to exploit.¹³

Smuggling, by contrast, takes place on the basis of a willing transaction between migrant and smuggler – in effect, a bilateral contract for services. Although in some cases smuggling arrangements may end in trafficking, the vast majority will not. The arrangement, for a fee, of an individual's journey from Uganda to Saudi Arabia on a false passport, where the individual then seeks work independently, is an example of smuggling. Were this individual to be lured to Saudi Arabia by a promise of employment as a maid and then become trapped in their employer's house, passport confiscated and wages unpaid, this becomes trafficking.

The latter example – which reflects the experience of thousands of East African nationals trafficked to the Middle East – is a clear example of trafficking, but a significant proportion of trafficking is harder to identify. Indeed, although human smuggling and trafficking are defined as separate phenomena, in practice they are widely recognized to exist on a continuum, with migrants moving between dynamics that have characteristics of each while on a single trip. However, the elements of each crime differ, as do the policy responses required to meet them. This brief focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on human smuggling. The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime will analyze the impacts of COVID-19 on human trafficking separately in a forthcoming policy brief.

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IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE

Closure of official border entry points

An unprecedented number of countries around the world have closed, or partially closed, legal ports of entry by sea, air and land to the crossing of people. Currently, this has both reduced overall movement and driven a greater proportion of continuing movement into irregularity.

Most entry-point closures target foreign nationals entering the country, making it extremely difficult for migrants to cross. Many of these entry-point closures have been imposed for a provisional time period. For example, Niger closed its borders for two weeks starting on 19 March, while 'Fortress Europe' closed its borders on 17 March for four weeks.¹⁴ However, if the pandemic is not brought under control, the periods of restriction are likely to be extended.

In Libya, well-grounded fears that the already shattered health system would collapse if COVID-19 takes hold in the country have spurred fast action. Both the eastern and western governments have taken steps to seal off the country to reduce or delay an outbreak. On 15 March, the Government of National Accord ordered the closure of land and air borders.¹⁵ The Libyan Arab Armed Forces has also closed its borders and there have also been curfew and confinement measures announced across the country.¹⁶

There is ongoing debate regarding the epidemiological grounding for lengthy border closures, and ongoing travel restrictions.¹⁷ However it is clear that such closures

Concertina wire is seen near the Presidio International Port of Entry on the US-Mexico border in Texas.

© Paul Ratje/AFP/Getty Images

have a significant impact on organized-crime dynamics surrounding cross-border movement of people.

Increased securitization of borders

The closure or partial closure of points of entry of many land borders has been accompanied by enhanced patrolling between official entry points to prevent irregular crossing. El Salvador, for example, has deployed additional border-force officers to survey known blind spots along the country's frontiers, where individuals cross without passing through the mandatory health checks conducted at official border points.¹⁸

South Africa has closed the majority of border points and deployed the military to patrol its borders. It has also launched (under emergency COVID-19 regulations) the construction of a new fence between South Africa and Zimbabwe.¹⁹ Although the fence was in part driven by a need to contain the coronavirus, it uses funds that critics argue would be better spent on the country's chronically underfunded health systems. Further, it is also likely to drive those who need to cross this heavily trodden border into irregular movement.

Prior to the pandemic, Algeria's borders with Niger, Mali and Libya (totalling 3 262 kilometres) were already dotted with radar installations, ditches and sand mounds and are heavily militarized in many places. However, according to smugglers operating across the borders with Niger and Mali, surveillance and border monitoring in Algeria have been ratcheted up in response to COVID-19. Police Border Guards (PAAF), gendarmerie (Gendarmerie Gardes Frontières) units and military patrols have all been increased.²⁰

Further, the focus of Algeria's stringent border control to date has principally been on preventing cross-border terrorism and the smuggling of arms and narcotics, rather than halting the flow of irregular migrants moving for labour.²¹ The state has sought to strike a balance between publicly taking a hard line against migrants – including through highly publicized expulsions of migrants²² – while at the same time attempting to mitigate the impact of closed borders on borderland economies, which rely heavily on cross-border trade.²³

However, stopping people moving irregularly has now become a state priority. Pre-existing border control infrastructure, together with heightened COVID measures, are now concentrated on the cross-border movement of people. This makes it far more difficult to smuggle people across the border.

Partly as a result of this, formal and informal cross-border movements of people along Algeria's southern borders drastically reduced in the last three weeks of March. Migrant demand for the crossing has also dropped, potentially as a result of internal-movement controls imposed to combat COVID-19 by origin or transit countries upstream. Further, smugglers themselves are concerned about COVID-19 and the possibility that migrants will carry the virus into the region, and so have become more reticent about supplying their services.²⁴

The closure or partial closure of points of entry of many land borders has been accompanied by enhanced patrolling between official entry points to prevent irregular crossing.

In the medium term, however, if COVID-19-driven unemployment and destitution sparks public unrest, attention and resources may be pulled away from borders. For example, the Algerian government faces the real risk that widespread protests will reignite following its announcement on 22 March that it would cut public spending by 30% and the likelihood of post-pandemic economic suffering.²⁵ In the mid-term, if this unrest materializes, the state may focus on maintaining domestic and regional stability and be forced to move some security personnel away from its currently well-manned borders.

Egypt may face a similar choice if confronted by the combined pressures of a weakened security force (through COVID-19 infection) and internal

unrest. Disembarkations from Egypt towards Europe stopped abruptly in 2017, and there have been no reported disembarkations since. COVID-19 may change this. This could be tactical (i.e. the state tacitly allowing emigration to defuse unrest), or through lack of capacity to secure coastal borders. This, coupled with the spike in demand for emigration, could enable a surge in movement.

Italy's interception of nearly 28 000 Tunisian irregular migrants over several months in the wake of the 2011 Jasmine Revolution offers a concerning example of how the widespread reduction in security-force control of borders, together with internal unrest, can enable mass movement.²⁶

Moving within countries

The scale and breadth of the limitations imposed on domestic movement to tackle the spread of COVID-19 are unprecedented. As of 3 April, approximately one third of the world's population was estimated to be in a state of 'lockdown', able to leave their homes only for limited, 'essential' purposes, such as buying food and medicine.²⁷

In some countries, including Spain and Italy, those moving domestically must carry a permit attesting to their need to travel. Similarly, the Nigerien government has mandated that those travelling by road within the country must obtain a special government authorization, and has introduced COVID-19 checkpoints manned by police officers. This has had an immediate and visible impact, with the main roads emptier than usual. Given Niger's pivotal position in regional migration mechanics, the policy has already started to affect migrant movement north and the human-smuggling ecosystem in the central Sahara.

Some countries, including Bosnia and Herzegovina – a key smuggling hub on the Western Balkans route towards Europe – have imposed restrictions targeted specifically at migrants, with questionable legal grounding. In mid-March, the Sarajevo Canton, which includes the Bosnian capital and various

nearby towns and villages, imposed a prohibition on the movement of migrants and ordered them into temporary reception centres as part of measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.²⁸

As existing temporary reception centres lacked the capacity to house all migrants, authorities ordered the transfer of some migrants into purpose-built camps. A camp with 1 000 beds has been built close to Sarajevo, while another is under construction near the village of Lipa in the west of the country. The latter has been met with significant resistance from the local community, which predominantly consists of post-war Serb returnees who perceive the mainly Muslim migrants as a threat.²⁹ Reports suggest that migrants will be unable to leave the camps, which will be under heavy surveillance.³⁰

Forcing migrants into densely populated camps with insufficient medical care demonstrates disregard for migrant rights, and heralds disaster in the event that COVID-19 reaches the camps. However, with anti-migrant sentiment increasing alongside COVID-19 anxiety, public resistance to such measures is non-existent. These measures make it increasingly difficult for migrants to move independently within countries, making them newly reliant on smugglers for clandestine movement.

Disruption to air travel

While overland movement is becoming increasingly difficult, smuggling by air has been rendered almost impossible. The cancellation of large numbers of flights by most major airlines has impeded movement even to countries where the airspace remains nominally open. This will particularly affect

intercontinental-smuggling operations. For example, the new trend of Pakistani nationals being smuggled across Niger on their journey towards Europe will likely be disrupted not only by the closure of regional land borders, but also by the inability of migrants to reach the African continent at all.³¹



IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE HUMAN-SMUGGLING INDUSTRY

COVID-19 and corruption

Typically, human smuggling is – to differing degrees, depending on the region – a state-enabled industry. Firstly, it is principally the policies of states that prompt movement, and the punitive approach taken towards irregular migration that ensures there is a consistent demand for the services of human smugglers. Secondly, corruption at all levels of the state is integral to the functioning of the smuggling market. Low-level corruption is usually predicated on high-level state complicity (or at least limited sanction) for misbehaviour. A blind eye is turned to misconduct that does not affect core national-security concerns. Such concerns often revolve around the protection of the state, construed narrowly as the ability of the ruling party, or the limited cadre of people in power, to remain in power.

The pandemic has, however, changed political calculations. COVID-19 poses three kinds of risk to states in the areas of public health, the economy and state stability. Mismanagement of the first two areas increases the likelihood and severity of public unrest impacting the third – and this risk of social instability may well pose the most pernicious and long-term threat to states. For this reason the fight against COVID-19 has to a degree become a matter of national security. The possibility of public unrest means COVID-19 presents a threat to the ability of the ruling party to retain

Police officers drive away a lorry in which the bodies of 39 migrants were discovered near London in October 2019.

© Ben Stansall/AFP/Getty Images

Many smugglers factored in bribes to the prices they quoted migrants, accurately perceiving them as a cost of doing business.

power. Consequently, high-level complicity with or apathy towards smuggling is likely to vanish, at least in the short term. This means that among the lower ranks, professional risks to officers who fail to obey counter-COVID orders will increase. Further, adherence to anti-smuggling orders may also be motivated by officers' desire to protect their own communities from contagion.

Evidence suggests that this shift is already taking place in some states. Before COVID-19, corruption among law-enforcement and border officials in northern Niger was endemic. Many smugglers factored in bribes to the prices they quoted migrants, accurately perceiving them as a cost of doing business. However, preliminary evidence suggests that official entry-point closures are being enforced: smugglers travelling through Niger to Libya who departed with a military escort on 17 March were sent back to Agadez upon arriving in Madama (a town on the northern frontier of Niger), as the border had been closed. In Mozambique, where borders are usually rendered similarly porous by corruption, analysts have tracked a similar diligence.³²

The same appears true of officers manning internal checkpoints in Niger, who are fulfilling their orders to stop migrants and check their temperatures as a rudimentary COVID-19-detection measure.³³

Yet the tensions between complying with COVID-19 orders and community pressures on the one hand and the need to sustain a livelihood on the other are already manifesting. Such pressures are likely to grow further. State wages to border officials and law enforcement are often insufficient to survive and bribes therefore constitute a vital proportion of earnings. Already officers at Nigerien checkpoints have expressed frustration that the decreased footfall means that they are not receiving bribes from passing migrants and locals. The longer the movement restrictions are in place, the stronger the pull towards corruption. Where bribes are accepted, desperation and higher risk is likely to drive up the size of bribes demanded.

Community-led movement restrictions

It is not only institutional restrictions on movement that are having an impact on smuggling operations – COVID-19 is also changing long-standing perspectives about migration and those who facilitate it. In many regions where mobility has been a long-standing facet of resilience, human smuggling is not stigmatized or seen as an immoral activity. Instead, smugglers are perceived as earning a legitimate livelihood through facilitating this movement. Local legitimacy of smuggling operations and the widespread complicity of borderland communities have posed a significant obstacle to counter-smuggling efforts to date.

This perception is changing in some places due to the threat of COVID-19 and resultant fear of contagion. Communicable diseases have a particular power to arouse fear because infection is 'transmissible, imminent, and invisible'.³⁴ This is particularly true for diseases such as COVID-19, which can be spread by asymptomatic carriers. Widespread fear of the virus and the risks of contagion are stigmatizing migration and the activities of smuggling networks in some areas.

Some governments have harnessed this new-found rejection of migration to help police the movement of migrants. Authorities in El Salvador have coupled border-closure and securitization measures with the successful mobilization of local communities to identify and report any individuals who cross into the country irregularly. Reported individuals were tracked down by authorities, tested and quarantined.³⁵

In Libya, where smuggling is prevalent, this change in attitudes is also occurring. A number of municipalities (including Kufra and Sebha) in Libya that are key smuggling hubs on the northern migration route from Africa to Europe have unilaterally taken steps to close their communities to smuggling, restricting access to the city and closing entry points. The municipal council in Kufra, for example, called on the military to increase patrolling and in particular to combat people smuggling due to the associated risks of contagion.³⁶ This marks a significant departure from previous rhetoric, given that smuggling is a key livelihood for many in these communities.

There is a precedent for community-led movement restrictions as a response to pandemics in the Sahel/Sahara region. A similar response was tracked surrounding the far more geographically limited threat of the Ebola epidemic in 2014/15. A local journalist working in Libya at the time reports that the fear triggered by the Ebola epidemic in West

Africa contributed to the 2015 blockade of people smugglers in Zuwara, a town on the northern coast of Libya, which had previously operated as a key disembarkation point for smugglers coordinating journeys towards Europe.³⁷

Armed groups are also responding to fears over the pandemic at the community level. In northern Mali, the state is largely absent. Instead the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), a coalition of armed groups, has consolidated support across much of this area, including Timbuktu and Gao, two smuggling transit points on the journey northwards to Algeria and Niger. The CMA has imposed counter-COVID-19 movement restrictions across the areas it controls.³⁸

In some cases, smugglers have chosen to suspend operations, fearing for themselves and for their own communities.³⁹ This has been reported by smugglers operating across Algeria's southern borders and by networks in Libya. Smugglers that seek to continue operations face significant resistance not only from local communities and armed groups, but also other smuggling networks. Some smuggling groups have issued warnings to other networks, demanding that borders not be crossed to prevent COVID-19 contagion. Already there has been one unconfirmed instance of Libyan human smugglers attacking Egyptian people smugglers trying to bring migrants into Libya from Egypt in contravention of such a demand.⁴⁰

Smuggling networks change the way they operate

Having no option to turn back, many migrants will continue on their journeys and will be faced by increasingly hostile environments. For smugglers, particularly those for whom smuggling is the only available livelihood, there are significant financial incentives to continue operating. However, smuggling operations during COVID-19 need to avoid not only the traditional targets of law-enforcement and border officials, but also bypass additional travel restrictions and evade local communities and criminal networks issuing edicts prohibiting travel. Smugglers moving further

underground to evade detection have been repeatedly tracked to take riskier routes or use more dangerous transport mechanics, such as sealed lorry containers, or ever smaller boats, with catastrophic consequences for migrant safety.⁴¹

The long-standing weekly convoy between Agadez and Dirkou in northern Niger, used by migrant smugglers to protect themselves from bandits who operate around Agadez, has been cancelled as a response to COVID-19.⁴² Smugglers who used the convoy to transport migrants towards Libya have already confirmed that they will merely find new

routes.⁴³ However, unsupported by military escorts, these smugglers (and the migrants they transport) will be increasingly vulnerable to attack by bandits who operate in the region.

As in any services industry, the price of smuggling services is determined by supply-and-demand market dynamics. The service that a smuggler provides – for a fee – is to help a migrant to cross a boundary or overcome a barrier. The harder the barrier is to overcome, or journey is to make, the more specialized the smugglers need to be and, consequently, the more they charge. As COVID-19 makes the environments increasingly hostile to migrants, and the operating risks for smugglers increase, the prices charged by networks continuing to operate may rise. Already there have been reports of smugglers hiking prices, both taking advantage of the renewed reliance of migrants on their services and to offset the increased risk of detection and sanction.⁴⁴ Although profits gained by smugglers for each migrant will increase, the price rise will make movement financially unfeasible for some migrants.

Air travel, which has been almost entirely disrupted, typically underpins ‘full package’ migrant-smuggling models, where smuggling networks organize the entirety of a migrant’s journey for a significant fee. Full-package services are the premium model of services that smugglers provide. Due to the high prices, they constitute a significant revenue stream for smuggling networks specializing in such travel, which is typically highly organized. Given that payment for full-package services is often provided only upon safe arrival of the migrant, after the smuggler has incurred the costs of purchasing the air

fares and procuring the fraudulent travel documents, this could cause some illicit-smuggling businesses to go bust.

Some migrants who previously would have opted for the luxury full package, which is typically far less perilous, will be forced to take more dangerous routes overland or by sea. It is possible that when airlines resume operations (likely much reduced at first) there will be additional documentary requirements to demonstrate that the individual has not been to a high-risk location, or that they have been tested for COVID-19. The smuggling industry has repeatedly reacted to changing conditions at lightning speed – in line with this, new restrictions would likely prompt the creation of a burgeoning new black market for fraudulent travel permissions.

Demonstrating their flexibility, some human smugglers are leveraging their networks to smuggle goods, responding to new demand for legal commodities whose supply chain has been disrupted by COVID-19 trade restrictions. This is occurring in Thailand, where people are increasingly using smugglers who previously specialized in human movement to move goods within the country and across local borders that are currently closed. Gemstone traders in Thailand, predominantly of Pakistani, Iranian and Afghan origin, are one group using human-smuggling networks to transport goods instead. This repurposing of smuggler services could also serve to introduce smuggling networks to a new pool of clients who may require their traditional services if they decide to move on in the aftermath of COVID-19.⁴⁵

Demand for human-smuggling services

Some countries have experienced a temporary surge in smuggling activity as smugglers and migrants have attempted to cross borders or traverse countries before border closures and domestic restrictions came into effect. The Border Police of Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, reported an increase in the number of irregular crossing attempts in early March ahead of the border closure to all foreign citizens on 24 March.⁴⁶ The timing suggests that this

spike was triggered by pending COVID-19-induced movement restrictions.

As movement restrictions are imposed and both state and community attitudes to human movement harden, many countries may experience a temporary decrease of movement. The number of interceptions of migrants departing from Algeria and Tunisia in March was dramatically lower than the January

figures, which had been particularly high for the season. Heightened internal-movement restrictions, especially in Tunisia, seem responsible for at least part of this drop.⁴⁷

For some migrants in Libya, the scale of COVID-19 infection in Europe has made the continent an unattractive destination, but many still express a desire to make the journey, calculating that chances of treatment are better within the EU. Were the virus to become widespread in Libya, or circumstances for migrants to deteriorate further within the country (as is already starting to happen), this could prompt a spike in demand to move on.

Across regions, demand could also be driven by the desire of many migrants to return home. Many nationals from the 16 Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries residing in South Africa are likely to react to COVID-19 by attempting to return home – a response tracked in previous pandemics, including Ebola.⁴⁸ Many migrant workers rendered unemployed by COVID-19 will be financially unable to remain in South Africa, as has been seen in the mass urban-to-rural displacement of migrant workers in India.⁴⁹ Movement restrictions and border militarization will force individuals who would previously have crossed legally into irregular movement. Many will need the services of smugglers.

The fragility of health-care systems in migrants' countries of origin may also sustain demand. Indeed, perhaps the most pernicious impact of migration on the COVID-19 crisis is not its role in spreading contagion, but the legacy left by years of emigration of low- and middle-income countries' health professionals to wealthier countries, leaving atrophied and gutted health systems which are woefully unequipped to tackle the pandemic.

The drivers of demand for movement have not decreased, but with the usual means of travel suspended, irregular migrants (and the smugglers who cater to them) are in limbo. Based on the announced or rumoured plans of the Algerian and Tunisian governments to maintain and tighten restrictions, and the imminent arrival of Ramadan, this pause in movement will likely last until at least mid-May, at which point movement may resume. A similar increase in irregular movement may be registered at that time in Morocco as well (where similar movement restrictions have also been imposed and Ramadan is also observed). As COVID-19 shrinks legal pathways for migration, a larger proportion of movement that does continue will be irregular and, given the increasing difficulty of moving independently, it will be smuggler-facilitated.

Around the world, as independent travel overland becomes more difficult, some irregular migration routes have effectively closed, displacing movement to other routes. One example of this is Morocco, where irregular overland migration transiting the country towards Ceuta and Melilla, Spain's enclaves at the northern border of Morocco, has been almost entirely stopped by COVID-19 measures. However, as of the third week of March, irregular migration on maritime routes from Morocco to Spain was still taking place. Smugglers are pivotal to movement by sea, but less frequently used by migrants to facilitate overland entry into the enclaves. With the overland route closed, smugglers may experience greater demand from migrants who had originally planned to cross independently into Ceuta and Melilla switching to the maritime route.

The drivers of demand for movement have not decreased, but with the usual means of travel suspended, irregular migrants are in limbo.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Up to and during 2015, a vanishingly small proportion of migrants traversed Bosnia and Herzegovina on their journeys towards Western Europe, preferring to stick to well-trodden paths through neighbouring countries, such as via Serbia to Hungary, or via Croatia to Slovenia.⁵⁰ But the construction of border fences between many countries in the Western Balkans, such as that on the Hungarian-Serbian border, funnelled unprecedented numbers of migrants through Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since 2015, hundreds of thousands of migrants, mostly fleeing war and poverty in the Middle East and Africa, have been travelling overland through this country.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has closed official border entry points in an effort to stop the spread of COVID-19.⁵¹ However, the border remains porous. Few migrants used official border points even before their closure, and authorities lack manpower to secure the borders fully.⁵² Migrants therefore continue to be smuggled into Bosnia and Herzegovina across its southern and eastern borders with Serbia and Montenegro.⁵³ Indeed, the Bosnian Border Police expect an increase in the number of migrants seeking to cross the border irregularly, given that the few who travelled through official entry points will be forced to cross elsewhere.⁵⁴

Migrants who successfully enter Bosnia and Herzegovina still need to traverse the country to reach the western borders on their journey towards Western Europe, and it is this leg of the journey that has become particularly difficult. Before COVID-19, migrants arriving in southern and eastern Bosnia had three options for travelling across the country: the train from Sarajevo via Tuzla to Bihać on the western border, walking, or being transported by smugglers. Only the last option remains. The curfews and movement restrictions imposed across the country, together with tighter police controls, make independent movement highly visible. Further, police are under orders to remove all migrants from the streets and transfer them

to camps and reception centres. Migrants have become a law-enforcement priority.

Even the remaining option, hiring a smuggler, has become more difficult. Both smugglers and migrants are at greater risk of interdiction. Countrywide curfews mean that smugglers cannot drive at night. Nationwide police patrols are instructed to check vehicles with foreign license plates. Smugglers are more afraid of the police than previously. Evidence emerging in late March suggests that smuggling networks in Bosnia and Herzegovina are reducing their operations, but have not yet halted them. In the last week of March, police caught a group of smugglers trying to transport migrants by car from the south of the country to the north-west border with Serbia.⁵⁵

Bosnia and Herzegovina now has a growing population of migrants stuck in the country as it becomes increasingly difficult to move on, particularly via the border crossing into Croatia.⁵⁶ Feroz, an Afghan migrant interviewed in late March who was travelling through Banja Luka, a city in western Bosnia and Herzegovina, was nevertheless planning to continue his journey, ultimately towards Germany: 'I spent almost all winter in a tent at the Tuzla train station [in eastern Bosnia]. I can't do that anymore, I'm going to Bihać and will try to cross over to Croatia.' Feroz had already travelled 165 kilometres from Tuzla to Banja Luka on his journey towards Bihać. He was unaware of prohibitions on the movement of migrants imposed in Bihać, but when informed about them, stated he would continue his journey across Bosnia and Herzegovina nonetheless.⁵⁷ Feroz had heard of COVID-19, but said he was not afraid of the disease. While admitting that it was becoming much harder to travel between places, Feroz envisaged continuing his journey across Bosnia independently. However, with intercity public transport increasingly interrupted in an effort to limit COVID-19 contagion, it was unclear how he would do so.



IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MIGRANT-PROTECTION RISKS IN TRANSIT AND AT DESTINATION

A more dangerous journey

Despite movement restrictions and fears of COVID-19 contagion, many migrants will still need to move, while many refugees and migrants already in transit will be faced by increasingly hostile local populations. A growing proportion of migrants will require the help of smugglers and will have to endure the heightened protection risks associated with more clandestine *modi operandi*. Fatalities are likely to increase, as highlighted by the recent tragedy in Mozambique highlighted at the beginning of this brief.

For migrants attempting the Mediterranean crossing towards Europe, the increased dangers of journeys stem not only from increasingly high-risk smuggler tactics, but also from the decreasing capacity and capability of support and safety operations due to COVID-19.

Official rescue operations have been complicated by the practicalities of mitigating COVID-19 risks,⁵⁸ and vessels bearing migrants have been quarantined.⁵⁹ The capacity and will of both the Libyan Coast Guard and European search-and-rescue operations are being diminished, and will decrease further if crew numbers are

US border agents patrol the Rio Grande Valley in Texas as migrant crossings decrease, December 2019.

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eroded by COVID-19. Further, a number of privately operated search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean are suspended.⁶⁰

Although it is difficult to predict the impact of COVID-19 on the numbers of migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean from Libya or Turkey towards Europe – a journey for which smugglers are crucial – for those who do, the chances of rescue in case of disaster are diminishing.

For those forced into immobility, vulnerabilities increase and support diminishes

COVID-19 and institutional and community responses to the virus are making it extremely difficult for many migrants in transit to continue their journeys.

As detailed above, COVID-19 and institutional and community responses to the virus are making it extremely difficult for many migrants in transit to continue their journeys. Some may simply be unable to continue moving. For others, high rates of infection in their chosen countries of destination have made them an undesirable option. A number of migrants in Libya originally planning to travel to Europe have reportedly changed their plans and decided to stay put after Europe became the epicentre of the pandemic.⁶¹

Some migrants will return home, but for others this will not be an option. This is particularly true for migrants who have travelled far from home and those for whom movement restrictions on the journey back renders return impossible. For Bangladeshi and Pakistani migrants travelling through the Sahel and North Africa on their way to Europe, the cancellation of flights will pose a likely insurmountable obstacle to returning home. Nationals of countries unlikely to fund repatriation missions, or stranded in countries that are perceived to be at a high risk of infection, may run out of options for moving either forwards or back. These migrants will be forced to pause in transit.

The potentially lengthy delays in migrant journeys caused by COVID-19 will not have been calculated into even the most thoroughly prepared travel budgets. Many families of migrants in transit will be forced to redirect resources to care for core family members who remain in countries of origin, particularly as income from labour and remittances decrease. Migrants who cannot get money from home will quickly run out of funds. Decimated earning options in transit mean those in jurisdictions where the state or civil society fail or choose not to provide aid to migrants will be left destitute.

Typically, migrants employing the services of smugglers who are forced to earn along their journeys are highly vulnerable to exploitation, including at the hands of trafficking networks. Research shows that 'travel now, pay later schemes', where migrants work along the journey to finance further travel, make migrants extremely vulnerable to labour or sexual exploitation, often in contexts that constitute trafficking.⁶²

Similarly, migrant populations in forced immobility – either as a result of increased law-enforcement efforts, unaffordable smuggler prices, or otherwise – have been found to be at high risk of trafficking.⁶³ However, in the immediate COVID-19 context, where physical proximity is associated with contagion and informal labour demand

evaporates, it is unclear what forms of exploitation migrants would be subjected to. In the medium term, as informal-labour demand resurfaces and the population rendered vulnerable through desperation grows, exploitation appears set to increase.

International assistance for trapped migrant populations is also under threat, with COVID-19 forcing a range of international NGOs across the world to evacuate expat staff and suspend activities. For those that seek to continue operating, their ability to provide support has been stymied by curfews and movement restrictions. In Libya, access to migrant-detention centres has been suspended (as a measure to slow contagion). Some organizations are seeking state waivers of curfews and movement restrictions to enable them to redirect resources

towards counter-COVID-19 measures, training front-line health workers and procuring emergency protective equipment.

In Europe, COVID-19 has triggered a drastic fall in volunteer numbers which, together with state withdrawal of migrant support, has led to the suspension of many vital migrant services.⁶⁴ With courts stripped back to skeletal services and asylum procedures halted, many migrants find themselves stuck in irregular status and unable to access services. Support groups across the EU are petitioning authorities to bolster support to migrants, who they argue are forgotten and abandoned in the COVID-19 pandemic, but as governments scramble to react to an ever-shifting landscape, priorities are elsewhere.⁶⁵

COVID-19 is swelling stationary migrant populations

Pre-existing stationary migrant populations (including the millions of migrants in camps around the world), together with migrants forced into immobility by COVID-19, are highly vulnerable to the virus. Self-isolation is impossible for many given that migrant-reception centres and camps are characterized by high-density accommodation and poor sanitation. In addition, there is a widespread prevalence of underlying health conditions among migrant and refugee populations, a vulnerability which is exacerbated by poor living standards and the rigours of undocumented transit. This combination of factors creates an ideal breeding ground for the virus. Some states have adopted harsh measures to dispel concentrations of migrants. Turkey, for example, has emptied and burned informal camps that mushroomed around the Pazırkule Border Crossings on the border with Greece, robbing inhabitants of the limited accommodation they had created.

Indeed, COVID-19 has already started reaching migrant populations, with Greece reporting its first COVID-19 infection in a migrant camp at the end of March.⁶⁶ It is likely that the consequences of contagion within migrant populations will be catastrophic, especially given that migrants will

be particularly underserved by state public-health systems, while governments across the world are failing to include refugees and migrants in their anti-COVID-19 public-health action plans.⁶⁷

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, resources available to cater for the country's growing population of irregular migrants were already stretched before the pandemic, despite tranches of humanitarian aid from the EU throughout 2019.⁶⁸ As COVID-19 drives up the number of migrants in forced immobility and massively escalates the health needs of both migrants and Bosnian nationals, the gap between resource and demand grows, and migrants will not be the priority. Analysts in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is currently estimated to home around 7 000 migrants,⁶⁹ note that while tests are scarce for the local population, 'none' are available for migrants, who instead are detained in disease-vulnerable, high-density camps.⁷⁰ As the situation in these camps deteriorates, those migrants with greater financial resources will likely be willing to pay premium prices to smugglers to help them evade surveillance and leave the camps, and then to facilitate onward movement towards countries where they may have better access to healthcare.

Across a number of countries, migrants are not included in COVID-19 response plans. Before COVID-19, South African public discourse stigmatized migrants as importers of infectious disease, in particular HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis. Now, with the country designing public-health interventions to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, the absence of migrants from political discourse is striking.⁷¹ Advocates have called for the government to make clear that migrants, regardless of status, should be granted the same access to health treatment and testing as citizens.⁷² This right is enshrined in South African law for SADC nationals but often ignored in practice.⁷³ A failure to publicly recognize this right, combined with long-standing migrant distrust of authorities (based on historical widespread mistreatment), will mean that migrant populations will struggle to access care. (These dynamics are replicated in other countries, including the United Kingdom, where NGOs have called upon the government to suspend conditions that disqualify those subject to immigration control from accessing public resources, and to safeguard migrant

access to healthcare and vital public services.⁷⁴) Some foreign nationals from the SADC region living in South Africa irregularly may even be wary of engaging with public-health services in the absence of government assurances about their safety. Such individuals are likely to evade testing and lie about movements and contact details, frustrating testing programmes and undermining contact tracing.

Leaving migrants and refugees behind in COVID-19 responses is likely to lead to catastrophe, not only for migrants but also for the host countries, given that efforts to contain the disease – such as community-based testing – will be stymied by a failure to explicitly include migrants. Public-health systems that are currently offering minimal support to migrants are likely to withdraw this as the crisis mounts, systems become increasingly overloaded and politicians are put under pressure to prioritize citizens' needs. Although politically foreseeable, such a situation is deeply problematic from both an ethical and a public-health lens, and risks deepening, and possibly prolonging, the impact of the pandemic.

Rising anti-migrant sentiment, eroding rights

Migrants have been repeatedly identified in public discourse as carriers of COVID-19, fuelling anti-migrant sentiment.⁷⁵ This is fuelling xenophobia at the community level. Mexican locals in Palenque, Chiapas, for example, took to social media to voice their resistance to the conversion of a community centre into an emergency hostel for Central American migrants. Authorities and migrants alike report that fear of COVID-19 contagion is combining with existing anti-migrant sentiment, particularly against migrants from South and Central America, to fuel stigma.⁷⁶ In Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, a poster containing threats against Cuban migrants was placed in a Cuban restaurant only a few days after movement restrictions were imposed.⁷⁷

Migrants, regardless of status, are experiencing xenophobic attacks in several countries. Such sentiments seem to ignore the pivotal role played by vast numbers of migrants in countries' health systems and agricultural industries, among others.

The irony of being simultaneously labelled 'essential' to the country and told to 'go home' by angry nationals is not lost on foreign nationals. Patience for such attacks will decrease further as the COVID-19 death toll rises among essential front-line workers, including large numbers of migrants.

As migrants find themselves in increasingly hostile environments, those in transit who had engaged smuggling services will find themselves more reliant on their smugglers. Evidence shows that in contexts where migrants do not feel safe, they are under tighter control of their smugglers, who become their de facto protectors. Such migrants are consequently more vulnerable to abuse at the hands of their smugglers.⁷⁸

From a public-policy perspective, the growth in anti-migrant sentiment is enabling measures which breach refugee and migrant rights enshrined in international law.⁷⁹ On 23 March, the US

Department of Homeland Security stated it will 'return ... aliens [seeking to enter the US] to the country they entered from ... Where such a return is not possible, CBP [US Customs and Border Protection] will return these aliens to their country of origin.'⁸⁰ There was no caveat restricting return only to safe countries of origin, appearing to breach the principle of non-refoulement enshrined in international law. Recent reports that irregular migrants are being ejected back into Mexico only 96 minutes (on average) after entering the US also suggests that obligations to assess whether migrants can return safely are being ignored.⁸¹

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, President Trump made several attempts to erode the rights of migrants and refugees accorded by international law, but such attempts were often met by fierce criticism and subsequently reversed or watered down. But as COVID-19 becomes a national security threat, emergency anti-contagion measures that similarly ride roughshod over migrant rights are subject to little public scrutiny.

If migrants, refugees and asylum seekers lose hope that their rights will be respected and that their claims will be dealt with fairly and lawfully, fewer will engage with authorities to regularize their status. Instead, a greater proportion will remain in host countries with tenuous irregular status, forming a shadowy parallel society that is highly vulnerable to exploitation by organized crime. This trend has already been identified in countries whose asylum systems quickly became more hostile, such as Sweden, which reacted to the 2015/16 'migrant crisis' by amending its legal frameworks surrounding migration and asylum.⁸²

As COVID-19 becomes a national security threat, emergency anti-contagion measures that ride roughshod over migrant rights are subjected to little public scrutiny.



LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Short-term impact

A group of migrants arrives at Camp Blazuj, near the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo, in March 2020.

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1. Although the overall movement of people is likely to decrease in the short term, a growing proportion of the movement that still takes place will become irregular. In many regions the smuggling industry is likely to suffer short-term restrictions on their capacity to do business, although some activities are likely to continue.
2. The COVID-19 penetration of refugee camps and detention centres may result in a humanitarian disaster. Refugees, migrants and internally displaced persons are not accounted for in the pandemic plans of most countries. Following seven years of unprecedented forced-displacement figures (with more than 70 million people displaced as of 2019), states are ignoring a large and highly vulnerable population.⁸³ It is likely that some migrants, aware of their vulnerability, will be willing to pay smugglers premium prices to escape camps should these camps be seen as hotbeds of disease.
3. There have been some suggestions that if the pandemic overcomes the weak health systems of poorer states, this could trigger a wave of irregular (in many cases smuggler-assisted) migration to neighbouring countries with stronger health systems, such as from Zimbabwe to South Africa, or from Libya towards Europe. The likelihood of this is unclear at this stage, but if this driver materializes, smugglers may offer 'COVID-19 escape route' packages, charging high prices to move desperate migrants across borders into countries where their access to healthcare is better.

Medium-term impact

4. COVID-19-driven anti-migrant sentiment may outlast the pandemic itself, while the economic fallout of COVID-19 could plunge migrant-destination countries into recession, further hardening attitudes against migrants. Widespread xenophobia in destination countries is already driving further securitization of borders, which, together with post-COVID-19 enhanced demand for movement, could grow the smuggling market in the medium term. Alternatively, depleted domestic populations in some countries could boost demand for migrant workers to plug labour market shortages, driving a more positive sentiment towards migration.
5. If COVID-19 restrictions are extended, they may be increasingly flouted. Experience combating previous pandemics demonstrates that the efficacy of state-imposed curfews and lockdowns is time-limited. For example, movement restrictions imposed in Mongolia to tackle the SARS virus buckled after a matter of months.⁸⁴ The scale of irregular movement will likely creep upwards, as will corruption among state bodies where chronic underfunding makes officers reliant on bribes, once again enabling smuggling.
6. Were a COVID-19 vaccine to be discovered, it is likely that the programme of dissemination would prioritize wealthier nations, leaving developing countries behind. Nationals from these countries would likely become increasingly associated with infection, as occurred with the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, fuelling securitized migration policies in destination countries. The further militarization of borders will once again drive reliance on smugglers and inflate the prices they can charge.
7. Regardless of how the pandemic dissipates, the underlying drivers for migration have not changed. The theory of a global post-pandemic economic 'snap-back', or instant recovery, is increasingly under fire. Instead, the post-COVID-19 landscape is predicted to be characterized by the widespread decimation of livelihoods and unprecedented unemployment. COVID-19 will exacerbate pre-existing economic stress in migrants' origin countries and transit countries, which could lead to a rapid and sustained outflow of irregular migrants from origin and transit states as soon as internal controls are relaxed. For states confronted with public unrest and growing domestic instability, borders may cease to be a priority. This could further enable a mass exodus from troubled states, with many migrants utilizing smuggling services to travel. Irregular migration globally is likely to reach volumes beyond those seen in recent years. Much of this movement will be smuggler-facilitated.

Long-term impact

8. COVID-19-driven anti-migrant sentiment may become deeply entrenched in the long term, although domestic labour markets could to some extent counteract this and sustain a demand for migrant workers. However, anti-migrant sentiment is perhaps more likely in the event that the pandemic is most quickly controlled in the developed world and countries of migrant origin become associated with contagion risk. Acute fears surrounding a 'second wave' of COVID-19 in the EU and US could foster draconian anti-migration policies, cementing smugglers' place at the centre of an ever-growing proportion of global migration mechanics.
9. The erosion of human rights during emergencies is notoriously difficult to reverse. The commitments made by states to respect the human rights of migrants and refugees in the 2018 Global Compacts may be quickly forgotten.⁸⁵ Instead, international frameworks protecting migrant and refugee rights, already straining under the pressure of unprecedented

forced-displacement levels, may suffer long-lasting damage.

- 10.** If this occurs, regularization options upon arrival are likely to be further diminished. Where migrants and asylum seekers are unable to have their claims dealt with fairly,

and regularization becomes an increasingly unlikely prospect, they are likely to remain in an irregular state for longer. This prolongs and deepens their vulnerability to exploitation by organized-crime networks, including trafficking organizations.



POLICY RESPONSES

Efforts to counter the COVID-19 pandemic have seen unprecedented restrictions on movement being imposed in many countries, both at international borders and within countries, while some communities and policymakers have adopted increasingly hostile attitudes towards migrants. While these measures are reducing migration and the smuggling business in many regions in the short term, they are also heightening migrant-protection risks. Such measures are also likely to swell the profits of the smuggling industry in the medium term.

Irregular migration made headlines prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, with smugglers playing a key role in the so-called 'crisis' of global mobility. Although the 'migrant crisis' has, understandably, been superseded in policymaker and media focus by the COVID-19 crisis, it is crucial that it is not out of mind as well as out of sight.

COVID-19-exacerbated migration drivers and the heightened securitization of the migration landscape may feed a more empowered, expanded and essential smuggling market in the post-COVID-19 landscape. It appears smugglers are set to become even more pivotal to modern migration mechanics.

1. States should heed WHO advice that border closures 'be reconsidered regularly as the situation evolves'.⁸⁶ In the context of migration, a protracted period of closed borders will drive irregular movement and increase reliance on smugglers, whose high-risk strategies to overcome the lockdown will result in greater dangers for migrants, including higher fatalities.
2. States must urgently include refugee and migrant populations in COVID-19 response plans. This includes clarifying that migrants and refugees, regardless of status, have the right to access healthcare and vital services.

Afghan nationals wait at the border crossing in Chaman, Pakistan, soon after the Pakistani government announced a COVID-19 lockdown, April 2020.

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3. Migrant camps should be recognized as high-vulnerability points, with the need to counter COVID-19 in them recognized as pivotal to the success of countrywide containment measures. Resources should be allocated accordingly.
4. Law-enforcement agencies should prepare for a surge of criminal activity, including human smuggling, in the immediate post-COVID-19 landscape. Devastation of livelihoods will increase both demand for and the supply of smuggling services, driving overall market expansion. Law-enforcement agencies must not be caught unawares and should channel resources towards countering the most harmful elements of the smuggling industry, where the influence of organized crime is greatest, and where abuse of migrants is rampant.
5. In the medium term, both governments and third-sector organizations working to support migrants in transit and destination states should coordinate communication campaigns that disassociate migrants from communicable diseases, combat xenophobia and highlight migrant rights.
6. There is a need for increased vigilance regarding human-trafficking risks in migrant populations. Desperation will drive vulnerability. Even in contexts where demand for the services of trafficked persons has been temporarily disrupted by contagion fears or the closure of informal workplaces, demand will quickly return once these subside.

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