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## Shock Mobilities During Moments of Acute Uncertainty

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### ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic and interventions addressing it raise important questions about human mobility that have geopolitical implications. This forum uses mobility and immobility during the pandemic as lenses onto the ways that routinised state power reacts to acute uncertainties, as well as how these reactions impact politics and societies. Specifically, we propose the concept of “shock mobility” as migratory routines radically reconfigured: emergency flights from epicentres, mass repatriations, lockdowns, quarantines. Patterns of shock mobility and immobility are not new categories of movement, but rather are significant alterations to the timing, duration, intensity, and relations among existing movements. Many of these alterations have been induced by governments’ reactions to the pandemic in both migrant-sending and receiving contexts, which can be especially consequential for migrants in and from the Global South. Our interventions explore these processes by highlighting experiences of Afghans and Kurds along Iran’s borders, Western Africans in Europe, Filipino workers, irregular Bangladeshis in Qatar, Central Americans travelling northwards via Mexico, and rural-urban migrants in India. In total, we argue that tracing shocks’ dynamics in a comparative manner provides an analytical means for assessing the long-term implications of the pandemic, building theories about how and why any particular post-crisis world emerges as it does, and paving the way for future empirical work.

### Introduction

Biao Xiang and William Allen

Do the dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic that started in 2020 represent a period of exception, or do they simply dramatise established power relations? Will there be a distinct “end” to the pandemic that signals a return to

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normalcy, or will the world transition into other political and spatial arrangements? What does a “return to normalcy” imply for the feasibility, desirability, and durability of state interventions during this period? In human history, supposedly exceptional and temporary emergency measures often turn into permanent rules and states of being, and therefore significantly transform societies (Anderson and Adey 2012). But it is also possible that aspects of the status quo may quickly resume, and lessons learned during emergencies may be soon forgotten. For example, the scale and severity of the 2008 economic collapse gave rise to the expectation that capitalism would go through systemic change. Yet the outcome has been disappointing: the old normal proved more resilient than many had hoped for, even if some opportunities for challenging existing orders remain (see O’Callaghan, Boyle, and Kitchin 2014; Rayner et al. 2020). As the world moves into a new phase of the pandemic, we need analytical frameworks to assess the long-term implications of the pandemic, and to explore the relations between disruption, exception, and the routine.

Our collection addresses this need by focusing on human mobility and state power. Instead of creating entirely new patterns of mobility, the pandemic has changed the speed, directions, meanings, and consequences of existing mobilities. We develop our analysis by proposing a new concept of “shock mobilities”, which we view as migratory routines that are radically and abruptly reconfigured in response to acute disruption. They involve both sudden surges and stoppages of movement as manifested in varied forms including panicked emergency flights from epicentres, mass repatriations, lockdowns, and quarantines (Baldacchino 2020; Xiang 2021). The shock mobilities and immobilities during COVID-19 have been unprecedented in both scale and intensity. By contrast to earlier sector-specific economic crises or regionally concentrated natural disasters, the pandemic has forced people across the globe to adapt their basic daily behaviour. These disruptions have induced cascades of mobility and immobility, including strandedness, compulsory repatriation, and the smuggling of both goods and people. In many instances, these have been – and continue to be – enormously consequential for migrants in and from the Global South. Our interventions draw comparative attention to these issues by highlighting the experiences of Afghanistans and Kurds along Iran’s borders, Western Africans in Europe, Filipino workers stuck at home, irregular Bangladeshis working in Qatar, Central Americans travelling northwards via Mexico, and rural-urban migrants in India.

While scholars have long documented that acute changes can induce refugee movements and other forms of long-term displacement (e.g., Kunz 1973; Van Hear 1998), shock mobilities themselves remain under-studied even as only some of them have led to protracted movement. How many of us remember the dramatic but ultimately short-lived mobilities wrought by the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the 2013 tsunami in Japan, or the 2018 Ebola

outbreak? Had we given more sustained attention to the short-lived convulsions in human mobilities during and immediately following these crises, we might now possess a better understanding of the meaning of these events to different people, and – crucially for theory building – how and why a particular post-crisis world emerged as it did.

Our argument and collected materials suggest that shock mobilities arise from the *proximate disruption* of the routine as well as states' *reactions to disruption* which may involve actively exploiting the exceptional circumstances. For example, as demonstrated by Shahram Khosravi, the Iranian government dramatically increased deportations of Afghan migrants, strengthened border control, and heightened policing in cities after the outbreak. In a region already characterised by chronic instability, the pandemic has ironically served as a means of making and asserting order. In a parallel way, Jorge Cuéllar speaks from the Mexico-Guatemala borderlands to show how states leverage unforeseen events to reinforce territorial control and sovereignty. He demonstrates how the Mexican state has used the pandemic as an opportunity to test and develop its border regimes that serve U.S. interests. These reactions display spatial unevenness, leading to distinctive convulsive movements.

Yet not all government measures have aimed to punish migrants. Control over, and care for, migrants are intertwined (İşleyen 2018; Johnson and Lindquist 2020; Molland 2022; Pallister-Wilkins 2015; Parreñas 2021). Yasmin Ortega and Karen Liao illustrate this by focusing on how the Philippines government banned the emigration of nurses to alleviate shortages within the country, while repatriating its citizens abroad back to the Philippines. They argue this was partly to present itself as a responsible state. Meanwhile, as Lamea Momen and Priya Deshingkar observe, Bangladesh and Qatar agreed to work together to bring stranded Bangladeshi migrants home. However, these seemingly well-intended government actions were implemented highly unevenly across space and time, adding further confusion and stress. In the Filipino case, international repatriation was not properly followed up by internal transport arrangements, leading to many returnees being stranded upon their arrival, and contributed to further tensions between the federal and local governments. Meanwhile, in Qatar, unregistered migrants have no access to state aid not because they are intentionally excluded, but because they are practically “unreachable” due to the lack of registration: a lack of *legibility*, rather than a lack of *eligibility*, has left them in limbo. Finally, as Mukta Naik describes, in India many stranded migrants were unable to receive welfare entitlements as promised by the federal government. This was because of the spatial discrepancies built in the system: migrants' entitlements are tied to their home place, yet migrants' city-level destinations – places where they

could be more directly reached – have little power in policymaking or resources for emergency actions. Thus, shocks have also originated from gaps which were internal to established systems being rendered visible.

State reactions induce shock mobility and immobility partly because they radically alter relations between different types and aspects of mobilities. Mobility restrictions imposed by the state do not halt mobility entirely but instead modify the relationships between outmigration and return, between mobility and stoppage, between migrants in sending and receiving communities. In short, shock mobility does not necessarily usher in previously unseen movements: rather, it indicates ruptures in the composition of mobilities. As political geographers have demonstrated, mobilities and immobilities are unequally distributed across populations (Cresswell 2011; Sparke 2006). Some people move quickly at the cost of others' opportunities to move themselves. Different patterns of movement may also co-exist within a single migration journey, although there are debates as to whether these situations constitute singular or multiple journeys (e.g. Bélanger and Silvey 2020; Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006). For example, migrants might move from rural to urban areas intending to eventually move internationally. Or, they may become hypermobile and “suspend” (Xiang 2021) their lives' routines in the hope of reaping future economic benefits.

Under normal circumstances, these relations between mobilities are regulated by social differentiation (e.g., the separation between “fast lanes” for the privileged and “slow lanes” for the less privileged in border crossing: see Sparke 2006), spatial divisions (e.g., labour migrant' constant mobility in the destination versus their stillness at home, linked by periodic returns), or temporal rhythms such as seasonal circulation and life course events. Dramatic state reactions to the pandemic disrupted these relations. For example, as shown by Ortiga and Liao, the gap in time between Filipino overseas workers' repatriation journeys and their travel home once in the Philippines left many stranded in Manila, resulting in huge disruptions to their lives and well-being. Hélène Kringelbach, reflecting on the experiences of West African migrants in Europe who faced a dilemma of deeply uncertain prospects regardless of their decision to stay or return, highlights how conventional views of migrant “return” and the conditions in which it happens may need revising. Connections between different types of mobility may also be intensified. Khosravi demonstrates how movements along Iranian borders during the pandemic accelerated existing mobilities while also created new connections among them. Migrants who were compelled to go home due to job loss and government deportation had to move again by resorting to clandestine cross-border trafficking more frequently than before because of the lack of economic support at home.

What kind of geopolitical order with respect to mobility may emerge from the pandemic? On the one hand, the spatial ordering of social relations that facilitates state control over mobility (e.g., borders, checkpoints, and residential segregation) is likely to be enhanced. Shock mobilities of the kinds we gather in this forum reveal how states' reactions to the pandemic – notably those which intended to enhance power and curtail freedoms – have had severe consequences for migrants. On the other hand, we may also witness the emergence of new spaces for action and resistance, particularly (though not exclusively) via civil society measures that compensate state incapacity in some cases and prevent state exploitation in others. For example, Naik provides a vivid example of how shocks have opened a “hyperlocal” scale of action in India. Residents, non-governmental organisations, and migrants are acting together to create connections that potentially generate new possibilities for future mobility and settlement, as well as provide care and welfare to mobile people outside the limits of states.

As we stand at a critical historical juncture that provides us with a unique vantage point, established but hidden power relations and operational processes have become visible, and possible alternatives for the future are also becoming more discernible. We hope our collective effort suggests new ways of examining relations between rare and routine events in the domain of migration. These will be critical for studying mobility and political change in a world deeply affected by COVID-19 – in whichever forms it may take.

### **Back to Square One Again: the Intensification of Smuggling across Iranian Borders**

Shahram Khosravi

Cross-border activities along the Iran-Afghanistan and Iran-Iraq borders have drastically intensified during the COVID pandemic. On the eastern border of Iran, up to 850,000 Afghanistani migrant workers were deported back to Afghanistan (Deutsche Welle Persian 2021) by the Iranian authorities throughout 2020. Many returned to Iran shortly afterwards through smuggling. On the western border, tens of thousands Iranian Kurds returned to Iranian Kurdistan from Iraq due to job loss, and many engaged in cargo smuggling. These shock mobilities, exacerbated by the pandemic, have deeper roots in international sanctions against Iran and rapidly shifting regional geopolitical rivalries and relationships. Cross-border activities in this region unfold between three countries that have been either invaded and occupied (Iraq and Afghanistan) or which have been exposed to harsh international sanctions (Iran). In this region, intervals between shocks are short: people barely recover from one before the next one arrives. Accumulated shocks lead to a continuous unsettling of precarious groups geographically, economically,

and politically. Furthermore, shock mobilities can be the results of deliberate government interventions. Partly as a response to external shocks, the Iranian government dispersed and deported migrants in order to maintain control over the labour force. These government actions created acute uncertainties for migrants. In this sense, shocks—as the etymology of the word suggests—are techniques to shake and push. Based on my field research and repeated visits to Iran since 1999, this essay offers a short reflection on these shocks and their consequences.

Living with these shocks, migrants from Afghanistan and migrant Iranian Kurds in Iraq found themselves in conditions of successive emergency. When migrants are suddenly removed and relocated, they are robbed of a significant amount of time—to say nothing of money and belongings. The economic and social capital they have accumulated over time is erased by shocks, i.e. being shaken and pushed away. Migrants describe this as being pushed back towards square one – both physically and figuratively. Afghanistani migrants being deported are taken to an official border crossing known as *noght-e sefr*, or Zero Point. The majority of Afghanistani migrants in Iran have been through Zero Point multiple times. When I talked with Afghanistani migrants in Iran, it is never clear where and what the word “*re-turn*” refers to: they use the word “return” for going back both to Afghanistan and to Iran. Every rotation to square one means starting almost from scratch. Therefore, a life in circulation – precipitated and sustained by shocks – is one in which people are placed in positions of *not becoming*. One never gets the chance to secure improvements to their socio-economic conditions, which is the ostensible purpose of migration. Chronic shocks result in a scheme of dispossession through perpetual mobility.

There are an estimated 2 to 3 million migrants from Afghanistan in Iran, of which half are undocumented. Iranian authorities have used the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to arrest and deport migrants to Afghanistan. News reports suggest that deportation rates doubled during this period (Fars News Agency 2020). The Iranian state also intensified mass deportation to pressure the Afghan government for political purposes in so-called “peace” negotiations with the Taliban during summer 2020.

On the other side of the border in Afghanistan, no “home sweet home” awaits these migrants. Deportees are abandoned and left with no support from the moment of their arrival. They also face stigma as potential carriers of the virus. Hotels and taxis turn them away or charge drastically higher fares. The sudden presence of a huge number of deportees on the Afghan side has become a problem for the state which is already struggling with high rates of unemployment, poverty, civil war, and internal displacement. According to Afghanistan’s National Department of Labour, two million people have lost



their jobs as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak (Ariana News Agency 2020). Furthermore, official sources warns that the rate of poverty is increasing from 54% to 72% (Pradhan and Cancho 2020).

In Afghanistan, each deportee can be a new client for migrant facilitators or so-called human smugglers. The large number of clients has resulted in rising smuggling prices. While the price of being smuggled into Iran before the outbreak of the pandemic was around 50 USD, in August 2020 it reached 100 USD. The irregular circulation of migrant workers during the pandemic is not only more expensive but also riskier as smugglers have relocated border crossings to more remote mountains. Meanwhile, the health emergency has led to more restrictions on movement between cities inside Iran. This has resulted in more arrests of undocumented migrants travelling from the border region towards Tehran (Abdulla Mohammadi, 4Mi Coordinator in Mixed Migration Center, Asia Region, Kabul, telephone conversation, 5 August 2020).

When back in Iran, they face different labour market conditions. While many construction projects and workshops are closed, migrants (mostly younger ones) have started working as street vendors selling mainly flower, cigarettes, and chewing gum to car travellers (Hamshahri Newspaper 2020). An estimated three million children in Iran earn their livelihoods through working on the streets of large cities. According to official sources, up to 80% of street children in Tehran are “foreigners”, usually meaning undocumented Afghan nationals (Deutsche Welle Persian 2019). Thus, migrant mobility has accelerated not only across the borders but also through the streets of large cities where they become easy targets for being sent back to Zero Point.

Meanwhile, along the western borders of Iran, another wave of shock mobility happened in March 2020. After the outbreak of the pandemic, tens of thousands of Iranian migrant workers in Iraqi Kurdistan suddenly lost their jobs and were forced to leave Iraq. Almost all of them were Kurds who returned to Iranian Kurdistan. In order to make a living, they often become involved in informal cross-border activities, such as working as *kulbar* which literally means “the one who carries goods on his or her back” through dangerous routes in mountains along the border areas in Iraqi Kurdistan into Iran. These goods can be anything – cigarettes, food, liquor, car tires – and create profits for local businessmen thanks to the cheap human-as-infrastructure of the smuggling corridor.

Each *kulbar* carries goods usually weighing between 30 and 70 kilograms for an average of 20 km along mountainous footpaths, earning between 10 and 25 USD for each crossing. Yet being a *kulbar* means walking on the death road: several hundred *kulbars* are killed or injured by the Iranian border guards each year (Parsa 2022). In a personal conversation, a young man who used to



work as a *kulbar* told me that after the outbreak of COVID-19, the wage has gone down and *kulbars* are paid less for every crossing. He believed that the sudden increase in the number of *kulbars* was the main factor.

The long-term reason behind the proliferation of small-scale smuggling of everyday goods in this area involving around tens of thousands of *kulbars* are the decades-long international sanctions against Iran. These have shrunk the official corridors of trade, opening up space for informal trade networks and various forms of smuggling. Financial breakdown and the weak Iranian currency have meant a widening in the gap in the price of goods inside and outside of Iran. For many citizens and migrants alike, this creates concerns graver than COVID-19. Harsher U.S. sanctions have paralysed Iran's economy and the Iranian *rial* has lost nearly 66% of its value against the U.S. dollar since March 2020. A more expensive dollar affects all other costs inside the country, meaning *kulbars* have to cross the border more often to meet their needs. Similarly, Afghanistani workers in Iran have to work longer hours because a weaker currency means less valuable remittances and higher fees for smuggling into the country. Compared to pre-pandemic times, both Kurds and Afghanistans find themselves in much more precarious labour conditions characterised by lower wages, delayed payments, and more competition over ever-limited daily waged jobs. Every return to “square one” means greater vulnerability, larger debts (to finance the next *re*-turn), and fewer remittances – which in turn lead to more frequently unauthorised border crossings to smuggle more goods.

The accumulated shocks drastically intensify different existing mobilities, and link them together with varied consequences. Every return to square one pushes Afghanistani migrants and Kurdish *kulbars* further from a sphere of security and towards a routinised everyday shock. Indeed, the government scheme of keeping migrants on move towards square one itself is part of the chronic shock – and responses by states both aggravate shock mobilities that have existed as well as engender new ones.

## Rethinking “Return” in the Time of COVID-19: West African Shock Mobility

Hélène Kringelbach

In February and March 2020, just before the closing down of borders between Africa and Europe and within the African continent, thousands of migrants from West Africa's Sahelian countries rushed back from Europe to their countries of origin (Hamad and Fatma 2020). Whereas some were following earlier plans to return home to visit family and, for some Sufi Muslims, to perform religious duties during pilgrimage season, others fled the pandemic for fear of being contaminated or stuck in dire living conditions without access to work and healthcare. Many were faced with a terrible dilemma and had to

make difficult decisions quickly: if they returned home, they risked not being able to go back to their lives and jobs in Europe at a later point in time. But if they stayed, they risked being stuck without income in Europe for an indefinite period, since many Senegalese and other Sahelians work in service sectors badly hit by the pandemic (or, like street vending, virtually destroyed altogether). There was also the terrifying prospect of becoming sick and dying far from home. Whereas many decided to stay put in Europe, others took a chance and travelled back home – by air for those who held regular status, and by crossing the Mediterranean for others (Martín 2020). By early April 2020, 2,500 individuals were stuck in transit in shelters set up by the International Organization for Migration in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, including travellers who had been rescued from risky Sahara crossings (Hamad and Fatma 2020; Petit and Robin 2020).

While this was not flight on a massive scale, it nevertheless was a significant instance of “shock mobility” because it happened suddenly and (at least partly) in response to the threat of border closures. But despite the shock quality of this return migration, the dilemmas that the Sahelian migrants faced at the outset of the pandemic cannot be treated in isolation of broader political dynamics between Europe and Africa. Specifically, these dilemmas bear the imprint of Europe’s contested migration control policy over the past two decades. Since the late 1990s European policymakers have increasingly focused on “return”, whether through deportation or “voluntary” repatriation, as an essential tool in the management of migration. In dominant policy discourses, encouraging “unwanted” migrants to return to their countries of origin – for instance through so called “assistance to voluntary return” programmes – has been regarded as a comparatively low-cost way of reducing immigrant numbers, but without completely closing the door to labour migration (Crane and Lawson 2020; Xiang 2013b). It has now become clear, however, that, on the whole, return policies do not have the intended effects. This is largely because such policies are often rooted in misconceptions about what motivates people to migrate in the first place, and because they fail to recognise that restrictive immigration policies often unintentionally prolong people’s stay and impede their ability to return (de Haas and Fokkema 2011; Flahaux 2017).

Recent research on return and West African migrants in Europe suggests that people are unlikely to want to return to their regions of origin before they have secured both enough capital to generate a decent livelihood upon return, and the ability to leave again should the return project not work out as anticipated (Flahaux 2017; Sinatti 2015). There is also evidence that the presence of family (a spouse or partner, children) in either place features prominently in people’s decisions to stay or return, as was already the case with the migrants who came to Europe through the labour migration schemes in place between the late 1940s and 1973.

Yet there remains a wide gap in our understanding of what “return” actually is, and what determines people’s decision to stay put or to go back to their regions of origin. The pandemic complicates the situation further. The border closures, the politicisation of public health, the stigmatisation of migrants and returnees, and the radical uncertainty resulting from the current pandemic may lead to significant shifts in mobility patterns, including patterns of return. In this context, how might migration scholars reconceptualise the link between migration, forced immobility and return? How may we better understand the link between family relationships and people’s decision to return, stay put or move onwards?

The shock mobility that we are witnessing provide a unique lens to explore these questions. One avenue for future research reconsiders the conventional boundaries between voluntary return and involuntary return, and between chosen and forced immobility. The boundaries are profoundly blurred in cases of shock, where migrants are faced with radical uncertainty about when and whether they will be able to move again – or to be reunited with families, jobs, or both. This raises important questions about the impact of current and future border closures on migrants and their families. When people are unsure of whether they will be reunited with their families in the foreseeable future, or when they feel exposed to deadly disease in a country of residence without sufficient access to health care, can return still be regarded as “voluntary”? When impending border closures mean that people know they might not be able to come back to their work and their European lives after a trip home, is the choice to stay put voluntary? Like others, the Senegalese migrants I have encountered in France, the UK, Spain and Belgium have been particularly reluctant to travel back home when they have had partners and/or children in these destinations. And does temporary travel for visits, but which extends for much longer due to border closures, constitute “return”?

Another avenue of research may focus on the wellbeing of migrants upon return. The outcome of return is highly contingent on the quality of the transnational family relationships they may have been able to maintain during their absence, as well as the relationships (family, work, friends) they have established in their country of residence. By definition, return as a form of shock mobility means that people do not have the time and resources to prepare their return, or their temporary travel home. In 2020, the millions of migrants around the world who travelled home had not been able to save enough to live and care for families at home for long periods of time, and millions of families have become impoverished as remittances have dried up. In Senegal as in other countries of the region, many returnees were soon confronted with the stigma associated with both their lost ability to provide for families, and the suspicion that they may have brought COVID-19 with them. By contrast, my research suggests returnees who have been able to cope have generally been documented migrants who had the privilege

of returning to jobs in Europe in late 2020, or those who have remained in Senegal but have benefited from remittances from relatives or friends in Europe. This points to the importance of taking a holistic view of people's relationships across the whole transnational space in which their lives are stretched to understand people's ability to lead decent lives during periods of sudden upheaval.

### **Shock (Im)mobilities within the “Responsible” Migrant-Sending State**

Yasmin Y. Ortega and Karen Anne S. Liao

In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, two types of shock (im)mobilities were distinct in the Filipino context: the Philippine state's decision to ban the outmigration of health workers from the country, and the repatriation of overseas Filipinos without appropriate preparation, which led to the returnees' strandedness and to tensions between different government agencies within the Philippines after the repatriation. We make three arguments about shock (im)mobilities as they have occurred in this case. First, these shocks resulted from state actions, thus calling our attention to how migrant-sending states impose immobility among its own citizens. Second, the state justified these activities mainly to project a desired image to its citizens, both within and beyond national borders. Third, these shocks manifested themselves in waves that compounded: the lack of organisation and coordination among state agencies amplified these shocks' disruptive impacts.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has had an extraordinary impact across the world, state-imposed (im)mobilities is not necessarily a new phenomenon. As different states have tightened immigration control and intensified deportation programmes in the last few decades, scholars have lamented the emergence of a global migration regime aimed at “sedentarization” or keeping people in place (Bakewell 2008; Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). However, less visible in this scholarship has been the role of migrant-sending states in creating and enforcing a system that keeps people in place (Punter et al. 2019). After all, it seems counterintuitive that a migrant-sending state would actively prevent its citizens from moving, given the enormous contributions of migrant remittances to national coffers. Within large labour-exporting countries, systems of migration governance aim to facilitate and enable people's emigration for jobs overseas (see Rodriguez 2010; Tyner 2004). With acute disruptions created by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is even less conceivable that a sending state would benefit from its citizens' immobility.

We argue, however, that the interests of sending states are not always predicated on the continuous outflows of their populations. A prominent example was the Philippine government's decision to ban the overseas deployment of Filipinos in 14 healthcare occupations during the COVID-19 pandemic, with nurses being the largest group. Filipino officials rationalised that

this policy would redirect human resources towards national health needs, providing much-needed labour in the country's overwhelmed hospitals (POEA 2020). Taking away health workers' right to pursue overseas jobs was meant to show how the Philippine state prioritised the health of citizens within the country. As one congressman argued, "We need our healthcare personnel here at this time of public emergency to attend to sick Filipinos, and not to foreigners" (Colcol 2020).

Professional nursing associations and advocacy groups immediately condemned the deployment ban, arguing that aspiring migrant nurses were family breadwinners whose immobility would have far-reaching detrimental consequences. Advocates also noted that there were already over 300,000 nursing graduates in the country due to the proliferation of nursing schools in the mid-2000s. In contrast, many Filipinos on social media expressed general support for the ban, suggesting that the current administration had indeed enhanced its image among local citizens by intervening in the country's labour-export system.

Yet months after the ban was declared, it became clear that the state's "reallocation" of health workers to local hospitals was inconsistent and disorganised. While the Department of Health had launched an "urgent hiring scheme" for health workers, complaints of late salary payments emerged shortly after the mass recruitment began. Nurses only received short-term contracts of up to 3 months, and any request for extension required another application.

Uncertainty was enhanced by the fact that the state policy about the ban was not clearly specified. National leaders portrayed nurses as "soldiers" in the war against COVID-19 and called on their commitment to the nation. Yet, state officials also emphasised that the ban was "temporary" and assured nurses that they would eventually be able to leave the country (Macaraeg 2020). The state gave no definite date for the lifting of the ban, keeping health workers with pending overseas applications stuck and leaving aspiring nurse migrants unable to plan for the future.<sup>1</sup> This lack of organisation worsened the anxiety and precarity that outgoing migrant nurses already felt when the ban was first announced.

Meanwhile, another form of state-produced shock (im)mobility emerged from the state's mass repatriation of thousands of Filipino migrant workers, many of whom lost their jobs and were stranded with limited funds in host countries, amid border closures and lockdowns. As of April 2021, the Philippine state has repatriated over 500,000 Filipino migrant workers (Gonzales 2021). While the deployment ban focused on building a state image within the Philippines, the repatriation programme reinforced a more global image of a "responsible" sending state that cares about its overseas citizens, building on earlier efforts to project government agencies as responsible rescuers of distressed Filipino migrant workers even before the

pandemic. This image drove a national campaign to repatriate Filipino workers who lost their jobs abroad, with the Department of Foreign Affairs (2020) proclaiming a “vow” to “leave no one behind”.

However, this state effort fell short of ensuring an organised return of its migrant workers. In May 2020, close to 24,000 Filipino workers were stranded in the capital city of Manila, unable to return to their hometowns in the provinces (Aurelio 2020). Apart from the government’s limited capacity to absorb returnees for testing and quarantine, local government units hesitated to issue entry clearances for returnees, fearing that they could be coronavirus-infected (Liao 2020; Santos 2020). As the plight of stranded migrant returnees in Manila generated public outcry, President Duterte ordered local government authorities to accept returning workers or face risks of criminal charges (Rosario 2020). Local government officials, however, stressed that their priority is to protect their constituents at home. While the government eventually sent the stranded returnees home, the situation revealed how tensions between state actors even within the home state can trigger acute uncertainties for migrants.

Geopolitical studies on labour migrants so far have largely overlooked the question of how migrants’ experiences of shock (im)mobility can be linked to the actions of their own sending governments. Migration literature has recognised how borders, governing mechanisms and technologies reinforce uneven (im)mobilities as people move through ‘fast and slow lanes’ across the globe (Cresswell 2010; Sheller and Urry 2006). Recent scholarship, for example, has examined how state discourses can (re)construct categories and definitions of migrants to justify certain migration policies (Allen et al 2018; Brigden and Mainwaring 2016). Yet, existing work has largely focused on receiving states’ border controls that restrict the entry of immigrants, and the role of sending states in facilitating emigration. By contrast, the Philippines’ COVID-19 experience illustrates how a sending state’s conception of desirable “migrant workers” can shift in an acute disruption. Moreover, it demonstrates how issues arising with state interventions such as the lack of proper planning and coordination among government agencies can generate their own second-order shock (im)mobilities that can be equally consequential for people’s lives—including those of migrants passing through as they seek to reach their desired destinations, as the next intervention shows.

### **Shock Testing the Mexico-Guatemala Border**

Jorge Cuéllar

Station Siglo XXI in Tapachula, Chiapas – in operation since 2006 – is one of the largest detention complexes in the Americas that presently holds mostly Central American, Haitian, and Cuban migrants. In late March 2020, during

a critical spike in COVID-19 cases in Mexico, detainees staged a protest to demand immediate release and expedited deportation back to their origin countries. Their demands went unfulfilled, as Mexico could deport no one back to Central America after Guatemala abruptly closed its national border. Sending people back to the Caribbean islands, or to Africa and South Asia, proved logistically impossible as states shuttered borders and went into extended lockdowns. At the same time, migrant apprehensions at the hands of police and soldiers at the Mexico-Guatemala border continued. When migrants turned themselves over to Mexican officials to request a return to origin countries, hoping to reunite with loved ones, they were sent to places like Station Siglo XXI and other borderland jails (e.g., Tenosique), forced to endure detention under conditions of immense overcrowding and little medical care.

The events at Siglo XXI are crucial for understanding the material changes taking place at the Mexico-Guatemala boundary, via hardening border security and administrative apparatuses like checkpoints, increased patrols, and deep screenings. This “mutiny”, as headlines described it, not only revealed the increased precarity of “trapped” migrants resulting from shifting COVID protocols, but also unveiled Mexico’s discipline-first practice towards migrants, one that offered detention instead of public health or safety. The decrepit state of human warehousing in southern Mexico served as a stress test for the U.S.-led hemispheric mobility regime itself, as a check on its most basic functions. Following on the heels of the early February 2020 caravan, the mutiny showed firm limits to Mexico’s border controls that to U.S. eyes, required immediate retooling and bolstering. While the mutiny at Siglo XXI uncovered the abject conditions under which Mexico holds migrants, it also undraped Mexico’s rapid turn towards fortification under the auspices of the U.S. – of the border, detention facilities, and roads – at the country’s buffer-zone with Central America.

The COVID-19 pandemic altered mobilities and imperilled migrants’ already fragile survival strategies for transiting through these border worlds riddled with petty criminals, cartels, abusive police and military officials. Like Mexico, Central American governments (e.g., El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) have adjusted border controls by seizing on the pandemic to strengthen security forces and increase administrative capacity (e.g., prolonged screenings, ignoring regional mobility treaties) to halt the vector and migrant alike. By using COVID as a rationale to further complicate migration, the pandemic has proved opportune to expand U.S.-style migration controls by putting more soldiers and police on the ground – shock troops – to guarantee numerical decreases.

U.S. political and economic needs define the structure of 21st century migration from Central America, a transnational system aimed at discouraging migrants from ever reaching the US-Mexico border. This multi-scalar



governance scheme, resting in histories of empire, labour, regional policies and security initiatives like the failed War on Drugs, task countries like Mexico (and now Central American nations) to enforce U.S. objectives. In mid-2020, the U.S. pressured Mexico to tighten its borders, who threatened tariffs on exported U.S.-bound Mexican-manufactured goods. Building on its accords with Mexico, the U.S. now coaxes Central American nations into doing border control, encouraging media campaigns that double as U.S. policy promotion to deter migration. Migrant-sending nations discourage migration through anti-migration propaganda, moral appeals, and repressive enforcement by stationing armed police, military, and anti-riot personnel to serve as a security perimeter for keeping nationals in-place (UN-OCHA 2020). For Central American nations, the COVID shock could transform what should have been temporary sanitary cordons into permanent forms of migration control (Dempsey 2020). Ongoing processes of border control in the region, building on pandemic protocols and extending throughout border territory, continue to obstruct exit routes for potential migrants. It was also during the pandemic that units of border control in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador that received training from U.S. border agents were deployed (Miroff and Sieff 2019). Border control measures intensified during COVID-19 may hasten the shifting of migratory routes towards the biospheres of the dense Petén and Lacandón jungles, into terrains used for smuggling, producing new forms of environmental harm as well as conflict for migrants (Galemba 2017; Martínez, Peña, and Guerrero 2019).

Prior to the coronavirus shock, analysts and journalists recorded migrations connected to economic, social, gender, food, and climate security. Now we must add public health, where the contemporary longing for existential safety from pathogens like the coronavirus are an impetus for transnational human movement. In the post-pandemic, these experiences of migratory shocks will almost certainly sharpen state techniques for mobility control. These migration dynamics responding to the pandemic interregnum should, in response, inform emerging paradigms on mobility justice as a portable research programme (Sheller 2018). As the region's governments renew commitments to economic liberalisation, opting into short-term fixes by incurring massive debt, coupled with crisis opportunism, the pandemic decisions to militarise and lockdown borders will, indeed, determine the character of coming migrations. Making the social fabric threadbare, pandemic politics may condemn generations of people to lives of grinding precarity, thereby fuelling mass displacement.

Thus, the reactionary deployment of military-police reinforcements, the ever-degrading conditions in migrant jails and detention centres like Siglo XXI that provoked the mutiny, alongside the transnational fearmongering of migrant contamination, are both shocks and shock tests to the Mexico-Guatemala border, and to Central America. The lessons gleaned from these pandemic (im)mobilities will be, indubitably, integrated into coming strategies

to secure Mexico's southernmost crossings with ripple effects – after-shocks in the form of consolidations of hemispheric control – at the borders of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. These troops, expanding bureaucracies, and policies are, concretely, the ramparts and moats that will clash with future migrants, to determine the shape of Central American mobilities to come.

### **Shock (Im)mobilities on Bangladeshi Irregular Migrants in Qatar during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Lamea Momen and Priya Deshingkar

I was doing menial jobs (*chhoto-khato kaj*) without proper documents. I was never paid regularly; say I would work seven days and would get paid for a day or two. Even now, after all the hardships for the virus outbreak and lockdown, I have not received those bills. You know they make people work but do not want to clear their payment.

This quote is from Murshed,<sup>2</sup> a Bangladeshi man in his early 40s who migrated to Qatar in 2017 to take up a job offer in a Doha-based construction company with a monthly salary of 2000 Qatari Rial (around 549 USD). He paid 450,000 Bangladeshi Taka (approximately 5670 USD) to his broker to procure – what he was told at that time – a *bhalo* (good) work visa. Soon after arriving in Doha, Murshed found out that the company that sponsored him under the *kafala*<sup>3</sup> or sponsorship system did not have a job available for him. Even though he knew that it is illegal to work with an employer other than the designated one, he decided to stay as his prospects in Bangladesh were bleak.

In the three years before the COVID-19 outbreak in Qatar, Murshed worked in construction and allied industries in Doha for an employer other than the designated one and thus, became irregular in terms of employment. He was legally resident (as opposed to legally employed), but he could barely earn enough to pay for the renewal of the visa and the Qatari ID card under a *kafeel*. Murshed eventually overstayed his visa, becoming an irregular migrant. Despite the hardship, his irregular status did not concern him too much. Partly this was because there are many migrants who easily slip into having irregular status. One can become irregular if fails to obtain a residency ID card after the first three months' probationary period, or when their occupation is not commensurate with the classification on the work visa, or if the employer company ceases operations (Jureidini 2017). But this is also because some migrants prefer irregularity because of the flexibility it gives them, particularly the freedom that they change employers. Most of the migrants whom we interviewed did not renew their visas and ID cards either because they could not afford the *kafeels'* fees or because they wanted to release themselves from those restrictions. Normally, they would simply get lost in the

system, taking advantage of their irregularity as much as possible by not being accountable to the state, *kafeels* or employers. Irregular migrants tread a fine line between freedom, risk and survival.

The shock of the lockdown following the virus outbreak disrupted this fragile balance. Most of the businesses that employed Bangladeshis have ground to a halt leaving them without an income. With Qatar under lockdown, Murshed lost his job and did not receive his final wages or any financial assistance from the company. Moreover, he did not receive any COVID-19 related health and safety information from his workplace. Murshed had asked for help from his family members in Bangladesh to pay for his food and rent in Qatar. The lockdown has been particularly punishing for Bangladeshi irregular migrants because of the specific position of Bangladeshi nationals in Qatar. First, Bangladeshi migrants are usually positioned in low-wage and precarious occupations in Qatar's highly segmented labour market, as they have been constructed discursively as docile and as capable of only the least skilled work (Deshingkar et al. 2019). They carry this identity in other international construction labour markets, as well, where they are also positioned in the worst jobs (Ye 2014). Their jobs are typically informal, without written contracts, and do not provide access to employment-related welfare or social protection. Second, this typecasting of Bangladeshis as low-skilled, low-waged workers intersects with their irregular status in the country to create a situation of hyper-precarity (Lewis et al. 2015) where they are under constant risk of deportation and are compelled to undertake informal and exploitative work in order to survive. Third, Bangladeshi migrants remit most of their savings to repay debts and to support families struggling with poverty back home. Therefore, they have had little to survive on during the lockdown. Indeed, they are now surviving on money transferred from their families back home, which has created an additional financial burden for them.

While the employers have abdicated the responsibility for the welfare of migrants, irregular migrants have also been unable to benefit from relief measures for migrants initiated by the Qatari and Bangladeshi governments. This has led to a state of protracted immobility. The Qatari Ministry of Administrative Development, Labour & Social Affairs instructed employers to continue providing their workers with food and housing, and announced that all migrants, irrespective of their legal status, could access health services. But migrants like Murshed were reluctant to apply due to fears of revealing their irregular employment status and being deported to Bangladesh.

These migrants could not avail the assistance provided by their own government either as the Bangladesh Embassy in Doha was offering assistance only to legally resident migrants<sup>4</sup> indicating a particularly inflexible and bureaucratic approach that was divorced from the reality of irregular

migration. For instance, in order to benefit from the offer, migrants were asked to complete online forms providing their name, telephone number, passport/Qatar ID, and address. Migrants who had failed to renew their visas or ID cards could not access the food aid provided by the embassy.

Both the Qatar government and employers are reluctant to be held responsible for irregular migrant workers as the COVID-19 pandemic deepens. Qatar is now pressing the Bangladesh government to take back its irregular migrants. The Bangladesh government has in turn asked Qatar to send a list of irregular migrants to be able to repatriate them. While Qatar is keen to offload its irregular migrant workers, and Bangladesh is making gestures to fulfil its moral duty, it is clear that neither side has an accurate sense of the number of migrants who have become irregular, let alone who they are and where they are. Although irregular migrants were able to work and live below the radar and fulfil family aspirations and material needs through the remittances they sent, they have suddenly been plunged deeper into extreme precarity due to their inability to access social protection.

The fallout of shock immobilities urges us to examine the relation between the state and migrants beyond simple binaries of inclusion and exclusion. While legality and illegality are stark categories in Qatar's immigration regime, the reality of migrants' lives is far more complicated. The (il)legality of their status is conditioned by their interactions with the state as well as migrants' ambivalence towards legality. In normal circumstances, irregularity can provide more freedom, and this has resulted in some migrants voluntarily opting for irregular status. But in a situation of emergency, their dubious legal status results in their vulnerability. While the state has attempted to reach irregular migrants, they have remained unreachable due to their invisibility in official registers and data. Thus, irregular migrants have no access to state protection measures, not because they are *ineligible*, but rather because they are *invisible*. The findings lead us to ask whether it would make more sense to push for universalising "reachability" in the current circumstances rather than legality. Such reachability, as the final contribution in this forum argues, must build on the work of local residents, NGOs and migrants at hyperlocal scales which, to have wider relevance, must be positioned within a broader institutional and governance structure.

### **Can "Hyperlocal" Responses to Shock (Im)mobilities Improve Migrant Citizenship? A View from India**

Mukta Naik

The large-scale exodus of migrant labour from cities to their homes in the countryside was one the most striking unintended consequences of India's COVID-19 induced lockdown, which was imposed overnight nationwide on March 25, 2020. This reverse migration was not triggered by the virus per se

but rather by the sudden loss of livelihoods, the inability to pay rent and the fear of hunger and mounting debt among the working poor. The panic was exacerbated by the very conditions imposed by the government during the lockdown. With public transport suspended and borders between states sealed, migrants took to desperate measures to return home, walking hundreds of kilometres or engaging private transport that was able to circumvent these barriers, at considerable costs.

These migrants' heart wrenching journeys urge consideration of how migrant citizenship is spatially mediated. Migrants' relations to their home communities differ substantively from relations with the neighbourhoods, cities and states where they work. On one hand, this fragmented citizenship induced shock mobilities in the form of panicked flight. On the other hand, the shock enabled a spatial reconfiguration of migrants' relations with destination societies, which I term as "hyperlocal". I propose the hyperlocal as a scale of action where, in times of acute uncertainties, migrants come into direct contact with diverse actors like government officials, NGO volunteers and residents. In hyperlocal sites, these actors collaborate in creative and spontaneous ways to help migrants, for instance by mobilising funds and distributing relief materials. Can the hyperlocal offer possibilities to rethink about migrant citizenship outside existing spatially mediated frameworks?

Even though the Constitution of India guarantees the freedom of mobility within national borders, access to social entitlements such as subsidised food and housing is contingent on documents that prove local identification and residence. This idea of domicile – of belonging to a particular state within India – denotes a spatially fragmented citizenship which exists in tension with the notion of a pan-Indian citizen identity. This posed particular problems for migrants who circulate between host and destination locations, even though livelihood losses also affected non-migrant urban informal sector workers during the lockdown.

Migrants stranded at destination locations, mostly cities, were not eligible for additional quotas of subsidised food that formed part of India's COVID-19 relief package and distributed via India's nationwide public distribution system (PDS). The PDS permits poor households to access subsidised food at a specified location of distribution denoted by the address on the household ration card, an identification document required for these benefits. Though portability features are now being introduced, at the time, migrants whose ration cards were registered at their home locations were ineligible for subsidised food at destination. Other emergency relief measures during the lockdown, like cash transfers, also excluded migrants due to the lack of identity documents (Centre for Sustainable Employment 2020).

Urban citizenship, in which the city constitutes the primary site for the construction and negotiation of citizenship through politically mediated day-to-day engagements between citizens and local governments (Heller and Evans 2010), is complicated for migrants who often vote in their rural home locations. Migrants cannot engage meaningfully in clientelist political mediation in the city, which often involves acquiring those very local identity documents which enable access to social welfare. Moreover, since urban local governments have limited autonomy and resources in India's governance system (Sivaramakrishnan 2013), circular migrants are usually seen as a burden and not enumerated for service delivery. In the absence of social security and public services, migrants bear higher costs to survive in the city until, over time, they build social networks and find regular employment. Migrants' low expectations from cities significantly pushed reverse migration to home locations where a fuller citizenship experience is assured. Thus, shock mobilities were not merely responses to an unexpected health crisis, but also originated from pre-existing shortcomings in India's decentralisation processes which has only partially devolved power to urban local governments.

Constrained in their institutional response owing to weak governance capacities, cities had to rely instead on the spontaneous responses of community actors, corporations, public officials, and political leadership to mitigate migrant distress during the lockdown. The hyperlocal allowed for spatially mediated citizenship to be punctured by immediate and direct action. For example, in Gurugram, a municipality located due south of the national capital Delhi, NGOs, labour unions, and citizen volunteers worked together via social media platforms to locate hunger hotspots, deliver food relief, distribute sanitisers and masks, and disseminate information about government-run trains among migrants wishing to return home. The municipal corporation partnered with local NGOs and enlisted cadres of citizen volunteers to run community kitchens and distribute ration kits to migrant communities (Naik 2020). In another manifestation of the hyperlocal, in many metropolitan cities, commercial logistics platforms expanded operations to home deliver essentials like groceries and medical supplies during the lockdown (Surie 2020).

The hyperlocal also played a vital role in ensuring the success of state government decisions to relax eligibility conditions for accessing social welfare during the lockdown. In Delhi, volunteers helped migrants complete online forms and track applications, thereby contributing to the one-time expansion of the PDS to 6.9 million additional households (GNCTD 2021). Local administrators in Madhya Pradesh relied on the knowledge of NGOs and activists to create new PDS beneficiary lists to help returning migrants who no longer had valid ration cards (Singh 2020).

These spontaneous governance arrangements offer the possibility of re-imagining migrant citizenship through hyperlocal practices, even as nationwide portability systems for social welfare evolve. Hyperlocality is particularly effective in city neighbourhoods that act as “spaces of engagement” where migrants create “networks of association” with stronger political actors in order to negotiate footholds into the city (Cox 1998). For example, in Gurugram, landlords of cheap rental housing often became points of contact for the delivery of food relief to migrants during the lockdown. Resident welfare associations in elite housing condominiums voluntarily extended food relief to neighbouring migrant communities and sponsored handwashing stations in informal settlements. At the same time, the hyperlocal need not be defined by territorial or legal boundaries, or by a demarcated level of formal governance. Instead, it can be conceptualised as an emergent action-oriented scale, an arena for experimentation and improvisation. As such, hyperlocal practices can have varying “spatial reach” (Xiang 2013a) to interact with national and transnational dimensions: during the pandemic, hyperlocal community groups funded their relief activities through networks in India and abroad.

As cities seek to attract migrants back to kickstart economic activity, the hyperlocal offers the potential to strengthen the capacities of local governments to address migrant well-being. Activists are discussing how they can build an inclusive enumeration system for migrants, essential to inform the provision of services and connect workers with employers located nearby. This may involve collating information from diverse sources, such as tenant records from police stations, immunisation and maternal care records from primary healthcare centres and food relief lists from NGOs. Scale by itself is not a determining factor here: rather, to respond to future crisis, cities must leverage the key characteristic of the hyperlocal which is the spontaneous coming together of people to collaborate and organise solutions to problems.

During the COVID-19 crisis, the hyperlocal has emerged as an action space for improving migrant citizenship outside existing policy frameworks for migration and urban governance. Ironically, it is the failure of policy frameworks that both triggered shock (im)mobilities and have made hyperlocal responses possible. Institutionalising the spontaneous and perhaps ephemeral nature of the hyperlocal to rethink migrant citizenship and well-being, however, will be a significant challenge. This will not only involve empowering urban local governments and strengthening democratic processes at the city level but also will require greater recognition of mobility as an enduring feature of urban poverty and informal work in a system that has, until now, supported sedentarism.



## Notes

1. On November 21, 2020, President Rodrigo Duterte lifted the deployment ban on health workers. In its place, the government cap the deployment of health workers to only 5,000 per year (Macaraeg 2020).
2. Interviews were conducted remotely with Bangladeshi migrants in Qatar in April 2020. For confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used.
3. Qatar had introduced labour reform measure in September 2020 which would effectively end the *kafala* (sponsorship) system.











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