

Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime

4th Technical Experts Group on Returns and Reintegration

28 and 30 September 2021

Co-Chairs' Statement

1. The fourth meeting of the Technical Experts Group on Returns and Reintegration (TEG-RR) of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime (Bali Process) was held virtually on 28 and 30 September 2021 and co-chaired by Australia and Sri Lanka. This was the first virtual meeting of the TEG-RR.

2. The 4th TEG-RR was attended by officials responsible for returns and reintegration from Bali Process member countries, as well as experts from international organizations.

- Member country participants were from Australia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Fiji, France, Indonesia, Malaysia, Maldives, Nepal, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor Leste, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and Vietnam.
- Participants representing member organizations came from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Office of Drugs and Crimes (UNODC) and the International Labour Organization (ILO). The Bali Process Regional Support Office (RSO) also attended the meeting.

3. The Co-chairs reviewed progress made in returns and reintegration across the Bali Process since the third meeting of the TEG-RR, held on 13-14 February 2020 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Particular areas of focus for the meeting included the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on returns and reintegration, improvements in the monitoring and evaluation of returns data, cooperation on identity and the treatment of returnee debt, and developments in national returns and reintegration policies across Bali Process Members.

4. In its update to the working group, the RSO highlighted publications that are available to TEG-RR members in improving returns and reintegration, including the Bali Process Policy Guide on Returns and Reintegration. The RSO reiterated its support for other Bali Process projects, including the longstanding Bali Process Assisted Voluntary Returns and Reintegration (AVRR) program and recent work conducted alongside IOM to research and analyse sustainable returns practices. The AVRR program has now supported more than 1,400 returns across the Bali Process region since its inception, including more than 120 so far in 2021.

5. The RSO also raised a forthcoming refresh of the Bali Process website and welcomed TEG-RR members continued positive engagement. Equally, the RSO stressed that its work supporting practical cooperation among Bali Process members continues, in spite of the pandemic and virtual limitations and outlined a number of practical capacity initiatives that had been delivered to

members following the last meeting of the TEG-RR. Following discussion across the two days of the TEG-RR, the RSO will look to host a roundtable on the issue of debt as a barrier to sustainable returns.

6. Discussion on Day One centered around two presentations from IOM officials updating TEG-RR members on the current situation across the region in returns and reintegration, the impacts of the pandemic and emerging trends. IOM demonstrated that the pandemic has left many migrants stranded through border closures and movement restrictions, a lack of commercial flights and the expense of returning to countries of origin. Some 2 million are still estimated to be stranded across the Asia-Pacific region.

7. TEG-RR members were shown that the pandemic has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities in some cohorts, such as female migrant workers, while there is also a clear, increasing trend towards online activity in facilitating irregular migration, with limited mechanisms in place to track this activity. IOM mentioned specific examples of best practice in returns and reintegration implementation across the region, and that the Bali Process AVR program was available for the most vulnerable of individual cases, including the recent high-profile return of Bangladeshi migrant workers from the Middle East.

8. In their second presentation, IOM focused on recent work, supported by the RSO, in evidence and good practices for sustainable returns and reintegration in Nepal, Mongolia, Pakistan and Viet Nam. This project was an initiative of the 3rd TEG-RR in 2020, with the recently released report now accessible on the RSO website. The IOM presenter shared with TEG-RR members the findings of surveys carried out by recent returnees to the four pilot countries, and the key factors in ensuring the successful reintegration of those returnees into society. Foremost among these being returning migrants' access to employment and training, and the quality of employment. The role of in-kind reintegration support, the existence and level of outstanding debts of returnees, and the family and gender profiles of individuals were identified as additional determining factors for successful reintegration.

9. On Day Two, TEG-RR members were provided the opportunity to update the working group on their national outlook for returns and reintegration and provide their perspective on issues affecting the region. Many members noted the severe challenge that the pandemic presented to their domestic settings, as well as their citizens abroad. Key themes that were identified across national updates included:

- Partnership between all levels of government, from local through to national, as best practice in supporting returns and reintegration. Members provided evidence of effective cooperation between government and civil society and non-government organisations to improve reintegration outcomes
- Developing national frameworks and sharing experiences in health and biosecurity issues during the reintegration of returnees into society
- Ensuring cooperation between members on identity and travel documents that are necessary for returns to occur, with a particular focus on the civil registration of undocumented migrants

- Logistical and transportation difficulties resulting from COVID-19, including the provision of consular services abroad, the availability of commercial flights for returnees and the planning of targeted repatriation flights for stranded migrant workers
- The importance of providing appropriate support to returned victims of trafficking in persons and people smuggling, especially women and children. Several members noted their community-based and employment-based strategies, including the provision of shelter facilities for survivors
- Appreciation for the Bali Process AVRR program and the assistance IOM has provided in the practical facilitation of return and reintegration of the most vulnerable irregular migrants in the region.

10. Day Two also saw a presentation to TEG-RR members from Indonesia, in their capacity as co-chair of the Bali Process Working Group on Trafficking in Persons (TIPWG), on potential linkages between Bali Process working groups. In particular, improving operational responses across the region on returned victims of trafficking in persons is viewed as an area of future collaboration.

Future Priorities

11. In their concluding remarks, the Co-chairs reiterated the necessity of overcoming travel barriers prior to departure and during return journeys. The Co-chairs noted that stricter health requirements for international travel, including PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) testing, quarantine and recognition of vaccination status, would be a key element of the TEG-RR's focus going forward.

12. The Co-chairs noted that some difficulties around the availability and cost of flights may improve as countries begin to reopen and international travel increases. However, the Co-chairs stated that it remains the case that returns are not possible without travel documents, and subsequently urged all TEG-RR members to continue cooperation on this issue, including the timely processing of travel document applications.

13. The Co-chairs proposed, for members' consideration, development of a formalised work plan for the TEGRR working group to provide additional structure and direction to future discussions.

14. Lastly, the Co-chairs conveyed the appreciation of the working group to Sri Lanka for co-chairing the TEG-RR during 2020 and 2021, and per the practice of a two-year co-chair term in the TEG-RR, invited members to nominate to co-chair the next meeting of the TEG-RR in 2022, in what will be the 20th anniversary of the Bali Process.

Dr Maria Fernandes Dias
Co-Chair (Australia)

Ms Piyumanthi Peiris
Co-Chair (Sri Lanka)