COVID-19 and Border Politics

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Key points

- Refugees and migrants are disproportionately affected by COVID-19

    - Crowded refugee camps and poor living conditions have led to outbreaks in France, Algeria, Bangladesh, Kenya, Lebanon.
    - Those in detention camps (UK, Australia and US) have experienced outbreaks, increased isolation, or maltreatment due to lockdown measures
    - Migrant workers in sectors considered 'essential' by governments, such as slaughterhouses, have received less health protection measures and been more likely to be exposed to the virus

- Deportations of migrants (US and Saudi Arabia) have led to the spread of coronavirus infections to low-income countries with limited resources to respond

- Migrant workers, and particularly undocumented workers, have been more likely to lose jobs or income due to the pandemic, and less likely to receive medical and social support

- COVID-19 has led to an unprecedented shutdown of borders and restrictions on migration (91% of the global population live in countries with restrictions on international arrivals, 39% in countries with completely closed borders)

- There has been an increase in violent pushbacks of refugees on borders (Croatia), immediate refusals of asylum-seekers (US), raids on migrant camps (Malaysia) as well closure of ports, including to rescue vessels (Italy, Malta), that has led to increased deaths in already deadly regions such as the Mediterranean

- Racist media outlets, organisations, far-right parties and governments (US, Israel, Brazil, Iran, Hungary) have used the crisis to stoke xenophobic sentiments

- Border militarisation has intensified using the excuse of COVID-19, leading to increased troops and hardware deployed on many borders worldwide (US, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Brazil, Greece, Poland, Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Portugal, Slovakia and Slovenia)

- There is a danger that many of these draconian restrictions, justified by governments as temporary health measures, will become permanent even as the pandemic subsides in the same way as civil liberty restrictions remained in place long after 9/11

- Amidst the pandemic, EU, US, Australia and others have continued to pour billions into fortifying borders, strengthening border patrol agencies (CBP, Frontex) and funding often authoritarian third countries to stop migration reaching their shores. The EU proposed significantly increasing budgets for border security in the wake of Covid-19

- Corporations have also continued to receive record levels of border control contracts, in particular arms companies, IT and biometric firms. Many of the companies winning contracts for surveilling, monitoring and tracking migrants have also pitched their same technologies for health and policing related to Covid-19. They will be one of the few winners of the COVID-19 fuelled border militarisation bonanza.

Introduction

Since its emergence in January 2020, six months later Covid-19 is still holding large parts of the world in its grip, as countries have closed their borders and restricted movement within them. Although the virus, and measures to stop or contain its spread, have had a devastating impact on millions of people and societies, refugees and migrants face even greater risk. For them, the virus comes on top of difficulties that were already exacerbated by increasingly stringent and often abusive border and migration policies across the world.

This briefing takes a look at the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic for refugees and migrants, and its anticipated influence on the border security and control market. What are the direct effects on migrants and refugees who are already living in vulnerable situations? What does it mean for people crossing international borders, seeking asylum, and transiting the deadly and treacherous migrant routes across regions, continents and seas? And how are they affected by government responses to the outbreak?

Since 2016, together with several partner organisations, the Transnational Institute (TNI) has published a number of reports in the *Border Wars* series, which explores the militarisation and externalisation of European and US borders, and the role the military and security industry plays in this. Earlier reports show how these actors have successfully framed 'illegal migration' as a security threat that needs to be fought with (para)military means, paying no heed to humanitarian needs and the right to seek asylum. The people on the receiving end of these policies are often extremely vulnerable, often fleeing war-torn and violent homelands or other forms of persecution.

Central to these policies is externalising the borders to third countries so that migrants, whatever their motivation or intended destination, never even reach US or European frontiers. European member states, the EU and the US channel vast amounts of money to third countries to stop people in their tracks, whether from countries across Africa, the Middle East for Asia, or along the border between Mexico and Guatemala. These policies have created a booming market for corporations involved in border security – building fences, providing equipment, installing surveillance systems and biometric identification applications. Major military and security companies, IT firms, research institutions, private prison contractors and airlines used for deportations reap large profits from keeping or getting migrants and refugees out.[1]

Covid-19 will not change this situation. Although a handful of governments have taken temporary measures to release detained migrants, postpone deportations and ensure access to health care, these are the exception to the rule. This briefing shows that the pandemic has led to an even greater erosion of the rights of those on the move, including the right to seek asylum and the principle of *non-refoulement*.

This briefing looks at:

- the immediate and direct effects of Covid-19 restrictions on refugees and migrants;
- government responses at this time;
- the longer-term implications of Covid-19 for border control and security corporations.

1. Effects of Covid-19 Restrictions on Refugees and Migrants

Hygiene and social distancing

As countries worldwide went into varying degrees of lockdown, governments advised the public to wash their hands, socially distance and stay at home. This advice assumes that everyone has access to running water, a home, and enough space to maintain a distance of one or two metres from anyone outside their household. Many migrants and refugees are living in overcrowded camps or shelters with little or no access to running water and adequate sanitation or access to health care or testing – so they cannot follow government advice to curb the spread of this highly infectious virus.[2] The same applies to migrants and others who are on the move at this time. Women and girls not only tend to be more confined to their shelter and have less access to health care than men, but are also far more exposed to male violence in lockdown.[3]

Refugee camps

Refugees living in densely populated camps are at risk of contracting Covid-19. Plans to move refugees from the overcrowded camps on the Greek islands were hampered by national lockdown measures and the unwillingness of other EU member states to take in more refugees, with the exception of a small number of unaccompanied minors.[4] In France, Covid-19 spread through refugee settlements in Calais where, in the absence of adequate state provision, aid groups have been meeting basic needs. Assistance has been scaled back or suspended because of the virus. Reports indicate a rise in police violence towards refugee and migrant populations in Calais, with UK funding to support the French government's creation of a hostile environment.[5] Numerous cases of Covid-19 have been reported in refugee camps in Algeria, Bangladesh, Kenya, Lebanon and elsewhere, countries with poorly resourced health facilities with severe shortages of beds in intensive care units (ICUs) and essential medical equipment. In addition, many people on the move lack regular access to news or information about the virus and prevention measures.[6]

> In the Nabadoon camp on the outskirts of Mogadishu, Asho Abdullahi Hassan, a 40-year-old mother of seven, heard about the coronavirus on the radio.
>
> 'I am very scared about this deadly virus. I only heard about it from the news. It is like we are waiting for death to come,' she says.[7]

Covid-19 has highlighted the existing failure of governments to provide adequate protection and decent dignified accommodation for refugees, leaving them to live in limbo in cramped and dirty camps. It is claimed that Western countries perpetuate these conditions to stop them from arriving.[8]

Deportation

Most European governments have temporarily suspended or reduced deportation flights to curb the spread of Covid-19. The US, for many weeks the epicentre of the virus, has not, and continued to deport people, introducing only one extra health check after 17 April.[9] Before then, thousands had been deported to Colombia, El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico, contributing to the spread of the virus. President Trump threatened sanctions on countries unwilling to

'I AM VERY SCARED ABOUT THIS DEADLY VIRUS. I ONLY HEARD ABOUT IT FROM THE NEWS. IT IS LIKE WE ARE WAITING FOR DEATH TO COME,'

receive deportees. Guatemala claimed that by 30 April at least one in five of its Covid-19 cases could be directly linked to such deportation flights.[10] Similarly, Saudi Arabia deported thousands of Ethiopian nationals, including some who had tested positive for Covid-19, posing a direct risk to Ethiopia's population.[11]

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Fahrudin Radoncic, the security minister, proposed the deportation of thousands of migrants to 'psychologically discourage new migrants from coming here after the pandemic ends and borders open again'.[12] In a written response of 18 May to a question about deportations to Poland during the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK Home Office stated 'We routinely help people with no right to remain in the UK return to their country of origin and we are committed to removing foreign national offenders wherever possible'. It chartered a deportation flight from Stansted to Poland on 30 April carrying dozens of EU nationals.[13] On 17 April, the European Commission (EC) urged member states 'as far as possible, [to] be ready… with the support of Frontex, to resume return procedures and deal with the backlog, when the disruption caused by the restrictive measures' has passed.[14]

Reception and detention centres

Reception and detention centres are often overcrowded and have limited hygiene facilities, increasing the risk of contracting and spreading Covid-19. In Ireland, asylum seekers were reportedly locked inside their accommodation centres, while in the Netherlands, military guards threatened to shoot at asylum seekers quarantined in a military barracks in Zoutkamp if they tried to go outside.[15] Many of Germany's reported Covid-19 cases came from overcrowded facilities housing asylum seekers lacking access to face coverings, hand sanitiser or disinfectant.[16]

By contrast, in early April Portugal temporarily granted residence rights to all migrants and asylum seekers, permitting access to health care and other public services. Migrants being held at a detention centre near Lisbon airport were relocated.[17] Belgium, Mexico, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland and the UK, also reduced the number of people being held in detention centres but often their release was not accompanied with appropriate protection or assistance and many were forced to live on the streets, exposing them to further risks.[18]

THE INTERNATIONAL DETENTION COALITION WARNED THAT DETAINED MIGRANTS 'ARE HIGHLY VULNERABLE TO COVID-19 DUE TO INADEQUATE CONDITIONS, SUCH AS INCONSISTENT TEMPERATURE CHECKS, OVERCROWDING, LIMITED SOAP, WATER, MASKS AND GLOVES, POOR ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE, AND LACK OF INFORMATION CHANNELS.[19]

In the US, detention is often outsourced to private prison contractors, which make huge profits as the number of persons placed in their facilities continues to grow.[20] Detention centres run by GEO Group, CoreCivic and LaSalle Corrections all reported a rapid rise in the number of infected detainees. In one centre, prison officials advised guards not to wear masks or gloves 'to avoid spreading panic among detainees'.[21] In another, despite the rapid spread of Covid-19, GEO Group tested only detainees and employees with symptoms of the virus.[22] In May, a letter signed by 70 migrants held at La Palma Correctional Centre in Arizona detailed how the operator, CoreCivic, had

forced them to clean the facility without adequate protection equipment, even after a number of Covid-19 cases had been confirmed. In dozens of detention centres, migrants began organising to demand changes in safety procedures, but prison guards responded with pepper spray, beatings and solitary confinement.[23]

On 30 April, a District Court ordered the Immigration and Customs Enforcements agency (ICE) to release hundreds of detainees at three Southern Florida detention centres, saying that the conditions there constituted 'cruel and unusual punishment' noting that ICE had acted with 'deliberate indifference' to the conditions of the detained migrants. In response, ICE bussed hundreds of migrants to other detention centres, where many of them tested positive for Covid-19.[24]

In at least one case in Australia, the Border Force said that it would only test detained migrants who had been in contact with a prison guard from private contractor Serco who had tested positive for Covid 19. Even after confirmed cases, no social distancing measures were imposed.[25]

In the UK, migrants held at the Brook House Removal Centre at Gatwick airport received a letter from G4S, the private security company which managed the facility until May, saying they would be placed in solitary confinement for a three-month period during the Covid-19 lockdown measures.[26]

Migrant workers

The International Labour Organization (ILO) reports 'rising levels of discrimination and xenophobia against migrants and in some cases food insecurity, layoffs, worsening working conditions including reduction or non-payment of wages, cramped or inadequate living conditions, and increased restrictions on movements or forced returns (where they may be stigmatized as carriers of the virus)'.[27] UN Women warns that 'women migrant workers face a higher risk of losing their livelihoods, having their labour and human rights violated and contracting coronavirus'.[28]

In Singapore and several Middle Eastern countries, many badly treated and poorly housed migrant workers contracted the virus.[29] In many industries employers ignored protection measures, forcing migrant workers to continue working in overcrowded conditions and share living quarters with no sanitation.[30] There were many reported outbreaks of the virus in slaughterhouses, where employers swiftly tried to blame the migrant employees' poor hygiene practices rather their unsafe working conditions.[31]

Immigrant communities

Immigrants often live in marginalised areas, in poor and overcrowded housing, and have limited access to health services. They are more likely to be in poor health, and have family members in jobs with no regard for safety measures. Immigrant staff are overrepresented in care homes for the elderly, posing a risk to themselves and the residents. In Sweden, a disproportionate number of immigrants, in particular from Iraq, Somalia and Syria, were hospitalised with Covid-19. Critics pointed to the government's reluctance to consider cultural differences and delays in translating information into different languages. For similar reasons, there were higher levels of Covid-19 cases among immigrant communities, particularly Somali nationals, in Finland and Norway.[32]

In South Africa, refugees, who included many LGBT+ persons, were excluded from a Covid-19 food and social grant scheme.[33] In Ireland, asylum seekers made redundant due to the pandemic were given a weekly allowance of only €38.80, compared to the standard pandemic unemployment allowance of €350.[34]

Undocumented migrants

Undocumented migrants tend to avoid making contact with health and other social services for fear of deportation. Similarly, they may endure exploitative conditions in low-paid jobs with no regard for social distancing because they would not be entitled to unemployment assistance.[35] In the US, health officials expressed concern that restrictive migration policies deter undocumented migrants from seeking health care when they need it.[36]

Some countries, such as Portugal, have introduced temporary measures to enable undocumented migrants to seek health care, so they can be tested for Covid-19 without being arrested. Italy and Spain rely on low-paid labour from both documented and undocumented migrants for their agricultural sectors. In April, the Spanish government permitted undocumented immigrants to work as fruit pickers for up to three months because of shortages in the food sector.[37] In mid-May, the Italian government paved the way for undocumented immigrants in domestic or agricultural work to legalise their status by encouraging them to apply for a six-month work permit.[38] It remains to be seen whether information gathered from these temporary schemes may be used to deport them once the emergency has subsided.

2. Government Responses and Policies

Beyond domestic lockdown measures and issuing guidance on social distancing and hygiene, many governments have shut down borders.

Border closures

According to the Pew Research Center, by 1 April, 91 per cent of the global population lived in countries restricting all international arrivals and 39 per cent in countries with completely closed borders for non-citizens and non-residents.[39] EU member states closed their external borders on 16 March and the EC recommended keeping them shut until at least 15 June,[40] although some began easing them before then.

On 21 March and initially until 22 June, the US closed its borders for all non-essential travel, stating that 'aliens [...] will immediately be turned away from ports of entry'.[41] More than two dozen US health experts criticised the closure in a letter to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), stating that 'the nation's public health laws should not be used as a pretext for overriding humanitarian laws and treaties that provide life-saving protections to refugees seeking asylum and unaccompanied children'.[42]

Even before the pandemic, migrants and refugees were being pushed back to unsafe third countries. Although national borders were closed to curb the spread of Covid-19, the major risks facing asylum seekers and their need for humanitarian assistance and international protection merit special consideration.

As ports in Italy and Malta are closed, there is no assistance for dinghies and NGO rescue boats adrift in the Mediterranean.[43] Similarly, Malaysia turned away boats with Rohingya refugees, fleeing from Myanmar or from camps in Bangladesh, for fear they were infected. One boat with 400 refugees aboard was stranded at sea for 58 days; 32 had died and the survivors were severely

malnourished when they were picked up by the Bangladesh coast guard mid-April.[44]

In Australia, closed borders have affected temporary visa holders, unlike nationals and permanent visa holders, not allowed to return from abroad, leading to prolonged uncertainty and family separation.[45]

Migrant workers, often having lost their job because of the pandemic, have been unable to return home as borders closed. Nepal closed its borders at the end of March, leaving thousands of its nationals stranded in India.[46] Colombia shut its borders to international travellers, which severely affected Venezuelans who rely on the cross-border economy for basic food items and health care, and were caught in Colombia, forced to sleep on the streets and threatened with imprisonment or deportation. Migrant workers across Latin America faced the same problem.[47]

Refoulement, forced returns and pushbacks

Forced returns and pushbacks to war zones and other perilous areas violate the principle of *non-refoulement*, prohibited under the United Nations Convention Against Torture (UNCAT) and other legal instruments. Many countries systematically fail in their obligation, effectively denying the right to seek asylum. This has intensified since the outbreak of Covid-19.

- The Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) reported a significant increase in violent pushbacks from Balkan countries during the Covid-19 crisis. In Croatia, the use of spray paint to tag refugees who were pushed back to Bosnia. On 6 and 7 May, the Croatian military handed over migrants to the national police, who drove them to the border and forcefully returned them to Bosnia. They reported that they were beaten, their belongings stolen and the police painted crosses on their heads and faces to mark them as migrants. They were forced into the border river and told not to return.[48]

- Malta closed its ports and enlisted the assistance of commercial fishing trawlers to push back boats to Libyan waters. Prime Minister Robert Abela argued that 'Nothing stops a state from using private assets', referring to migrants being picked up and contained on cruise ships, for which he said the EC would pay.[49] An eyewitness account of a boat pushed back to Libya said that after five days at sea a trawler brought them back to Libya, where they were jailed in one of the most notorious detention centres. Twelve died during the crossing, the interception at sea and the return to Libya. According to Giulia Tranchina, a human rights lawyer: 'Maltese authorities' refusal to rescue these persons amount to a serious breach of international human rights and maritime law'.[50]

- Ports in Italy and Malta remain closed and refugee boats in distress are either not rescued or pushed back to Libya. NGOs' search and rescue work has become almost impossible. Italy grounded two remaining NGO rescue boats. According to Miriam Edding of Alarm Phone: 'We are in a special situation, but I don't know of any law that says if you have a pandemic you're allowed to let people die in the sea'.[51]

In the US, on 20 March the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued an order to deny entry to and encourage the immediate deportation of non-citizens arriving without valid documents, citing an obscure quarantine law to justify this on public health grounds.[52] As President Trump announced the order at a press briefing, he made clear that it fulfils his longstanding wish to end immigration.[53] By 1 May 20,000 people had been expelled within a couple of hours of arrival.[54] The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) condemned the order and Lucas Guttentag, a professor of immigration law, said: 'The CDC order is designed to accomplish under the guise of public health a dismantling of legal protections governing border arrivals that the Trump administration has been unable to achieve under the immigration laws'.[55] However, the CDC still extended the order indefinitely on 19 May.[56]

'THE CENTRES FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION ORDER IS DESIGNED TO ACCOMPLISH, UNDER THE GUISE OF PUBLIC HEALTH, A DISMANTLING OF LEGAL PROTECTIONS GOVERNING BORDER ARRIVALS THAT THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION HAS BEEN UNABLE TO ACHIEVE UNDER IMMIGRATION LAWS'.

Halting and pausing asylum applications

Several countries with closed borders are not accepting new asylum requests and/or have suspended pending applications. Immigration authorities and courts cite Covid-19 as a reason for being unable to conduct interviews and process cases. While the US returns migrants on entry, many European countries have left them in limbo regarding asylum applications or their assessment. Germany, Ireland and Sweden are still processing new requests, while France has moved to an unclear process in which applications have to be made by post.[57] The Austrian government, by contrast, issued a decree under which asylum seekers can be rejected at the border if they cannot produce a health certificate.[58]

Raids and arrests

In mid-May, the police carried out raids to arrest and detain hundreds of undocumented migrants in the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur. Police chief Abdul Hamid Bador said that this was to prevent them spreading Covid-19.[59] Those who tested negative were put in immigration detention. In Bosnia, at the end of March the authorities violently picked up hundreds of migrants living in improvised shelter and transported them to the new Lipa Camp, which is managed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), mainly with EU funding.[60]

In the US, ICE was heavily criticized for continuing raids after a lockdown was declared. From February, Border Patrol Tactical Units were ordered to 'flood the streets' of sanctuary cities to arrest as many irregular migrants as possible, including those who had overstayed entry visas. This meant there were many extra detainees at the start of the pandemic outbreak in the US. Even after the outbreak was declared a national emergency, ICE agents continued raids and were seen wearing N95 medical masks, which were in short supply for frontline health workers.[61]

Long-term consequences

It is difficult to predict how long the Covid-19 crisis will continue, how long restriction measures will remain in place, and what the long-term effects will be, but the direct and indirect consequences,

including the rise of xenophobia, may well make things harder for migrants and other displaced people for a long time to come.[62] It is also likely that some of the new policies and restrictions will continue, along with existing border and migration policies and technology, and that these will seep into the wider society.

This is clear in the brutal crackdown on protests and the press after the police killing of an unarmed black person, George Floyd, in Minneapolis at the end of May. In addition to highly militarised police forces, the Trump Administration and lower-level governments deployed the National Guard, domestic-oriented military reserves, and military police, threatening to use active troops to 'dominate the streets'.[63] The CBP was involved in this policing operation, flying a Predator drone over demonstrations held against police brutality and racism in Minneapolis, to provide 'live video feed to ground law enforcement, giving them situational awareness'.[64] From the end of May the CBP and ICE also deployed officers, agents, drones and planes across the country to assist the police.[65] The National Immigrant Justice Center recalled that 'Black communities for generations have disproportionately borne the brunt of police militarization and brutality that often is also deployed to detain and deport immigrants.'[66]

Covid-19 has sometimes been a pretext to introduce more restrictive policies, which may well become (semi-)permanent.[67] Naomi Klein highlighted 'the brutal tactic of using the public's disorientation following a collective shock – wars, coups, terrorist attacks, market crashes or natural disasters – to push through radical pro-corporate measures, often called "shock therapy"'[68] to characterise US government plans: 'We know what Trump's plan is: a pandemic shock doctrine, featuring all the most dangerous ideas lying around, from privatizing Social Security to locking down borders to caging even more migrants'.[69] And indeed, in June the US administration proposed allowing immigration judges to throw out asylum cases without a hearing, effectively denying asylum to any refugee who does not clearly qualify at their first application.[70]

The move to cut back refugee rights beyond Covid-19 measures can also be seen in countries such as Hungary and Malaysia. There have been several raids to arrest undocumented migrants in Malaysia, particularly of Rohingya refugees. Defence Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri said the raids are 'a continuous exercise to weed out undocumented foreigners' and will continue after Covid-19 restrictions are lifted.[71]

Stranded in dire circumstances

Nobody knows how long border closures, non-acceptance of new asylum applications and suspensions of ongoing ones will be in force. Even when governments ease restrictions and resume the handling of applications, the backlog will leave many asylum seekers in limbo, living in difficult and often overcrowded conditions.[72] The closure of borders and other restrictions may lead to more internal displacement and to problems in transit countries, with many refugees who are stopped at borders stranded in official or makeshift shelter or on the streets.[73]

Between February and March, when European countries closed their external borders, asylum applications across the EU fell by 43 per cent.[74] According to Frontex, in March the 'number of detections of illegal border crossings on Europe's main migratory routes fell by nearly half' from February, and by 85 per cent between March and April to around 900, the lowest number since it started collecting such data in 2009.[75] This doesn't mean that far fewer migrants were on their way to Europe, but that many remain stranded in transit countries.

By early April, hundreds of people were stuck in Niger, for example, often in makeshift camps in a country at the bottom of the United Nations Human Development Index with almost no health infrastructure.[76] Similarly, thousands of migrants heading to the US got stuck in Mexico, adding to the queue of those already waiting for asylum applications to be processed, many of which are now suspended, and joined by those rebuffed at the border.[77]

The EU and the US are likely to intensify border externalisation, putting more pressure on unsafe and poorer third countries in Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America to keep migrants away from their borders. For instance, in mid-April, EU foreign ministers agreed to channel €100 million from the European Neighbourhood Instrument and the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa to Libya in another bid to stop migration to Europe, including €15 million to strengthen the interception capacities of the notorious Libyan Coast Guard.[78] At the end of May several ministers from Malta visited the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli to discuss migration cooperation, including the prevention of migration across Libya's southern border, and agreed to set up coordination units in both countries to assist in operations against irregular migration.[79]

More risks for migrants

The European Asylum Support Office (EASO) foresees an increase in asylum applications in the EU as an indirect consequence of Covid-19.[80] The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) predicts that the economic impact of the pandemic may lead to 'an increase in smuggling of migrants and trafficking in person flows from the most affected countries to more affluent destinations'. [81] For years there have been warnings that tightening border security forces migrants to take more dangerous routes and pushes them into the hands of criminal smuggling networks.[82] Looking at earlier responses by the EU, the US and Australia to increasing numbers of refugees, it can be expected that they again will introduce more restrictive migration policies, fuelling this cycle of danger and violence even more.

Border security and militarisation

Militarising borders to stop migrants from entering has been going on for many years.[83] The Covid-19 crisis has led to increased border security without much public protest. The intensification of militarised borders in response to Covid-19 makes it harder for migrants to cross borders or to seek asylum and exposes them to violence.

TIGHTENING BORDER SECURITY FORCES MIGRANTS TO TAKE MORE DANGEROUS ROUTES AND PUSHES THEM INTO THE HANDS OF CRIMINAL SMUGGLING NETWORKS.

The US, for example, deployed an extra 540 troops on its already highly militarised border with Mexico.[84] In Peru, the army used tanks and planes to prevent border crossings and patrol its borders.[85] Ecuador deployed military personnel to detect unauthorised border crossings.[86] In mid-May, Colombia announced the decision 'to militarize all border points' stating that the military would have 'greater presence and exercise respective control to prevent imported cases [of Covid-19]'. Brazil also saw increased military presence along its border with Paraguay.[87]

In Europe, Greece sent military vehicles and 400 additional border guards to join existing army and police patrols at the Evros border with Turkey during the month of May.[88] Poland deployed

1,460 soldiers to support the Border Guard and police as part of a larger military operation in response to Covid-19.[89] The Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands (military police), North Macedonia, Slovakia and Slovenia also deployed armed forces at the borders to assist with controls and patrols.[90] The Portuguese police also used military drones.[91]

Government responses to Covid-19 often deploy the military to support aid and medical services and sometimes to assist the police and security forces or as an independent body to enforce restrictions. This broader militarisation of societies, along with increased police powers, increases the likelihood of contact with the authorities, and puts migrants – especially the undocumented – at risk of arrest, detention and deportation.[92]

Frontex

During the pandemic, the EU border guard agency Frontex has continued its efforts to strengthen itself, including its ambitions to buy or lease its own equipment. At the end of March, 100 officers from its new fast border intervention team were deployed between Greece and Turkey and in early April the agency announced that most of the EU's participating member states had agreed to continue their deployment. Despite travel restrictions throughout Europe, German and Danish officers were flown to and from Greece.[93]

On Europe Day on 8 May, Frontex made a declaration couched in anti-migration rhetoric: 'If we cannot control the external borders, we cannot control the spread of pandemics in Europe. Frontex plays a key role in ensuring effective protection of the external borders of the European Union not only against cross-border crime but also against health threats'.[94] An internal Frontex report acknowledges 'severe consequences of the COVID-19 restrictions introduced by MS [Member States]. ... These have affected recruitment and training plans for its new standing corps of border guards'. Frontex fears that the 'economic implications of COVID-19 on the Member States' will lead to budget cuts, and emphasises that it must stay on track in acquiring its own equipment and investing in IT systems.[95]

Surveillance technologies, biometrics and border control

Kristin B. Sandvik at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) in Norway and Adèle Garnier at Macquarie University in Australia warn that 'there will also be further indirect consequences from the many examples of extensive emergency legislation being rushed through domestic parliaments, allowing governments to rule by decree or threatening human rights. The new laws may contribute to a general democratic backlash with direct policy and regulatory implication for the migration field'.[96]

Large-scale efforts to monitor, control and prevent the spread of Covid-19 are now accompanied by new technologies for data collection and analysis, monitoring and surveillance – digital, electronic and 'in the streets' – which are already used in policing borders and migration.[97] The tech companies are now promoting the use of these applications for health and policing services, blurring the lines between security, military and civil use and endangering the right to privacy and other human rights. The speed with which these technologies can be applied is evident in their use in contract tracing to build a picture of the affiliations and networks of people arrested during the protests following the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. There measures

were announced by the Minnesota Public Safety Commissioner John Harrington just weeks after the Minnesota Department of Health pushed voluntary contract tracing to stem the spread of Covid-19.[98]

Petra Molnar, a lawyer, and Diego Naranjo at European Digital Rights note that refugees 'often become guinea pigs on which to test new surveillance tools before bringing them to the wider population', which is even more likely during and after the Covid-19 crisis. In turn, refugees are then bound to be primary targets for their expanded use.[99]

Border and migration authorities may hasten the move from fingerprints to contactless biometric identification, such as face scanners. The CBP, which piloted face recognition in 2018, is promoting this as more hygienic than other screening. [100] According to the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF): 'It is all too likely that any new use of face surveillance to contain COVID-19 would long outlive the public health emergency. In a year, systems that were put in place to track infected individuals as they move through a city could be re-deployed to track people as they walk away from a political demonstration or their immigration attorney's office'.[101] Governments could easily use face recognition to identify anyone they wish to control or silence, and migration authorities could use it to detect, track and monitor migrants before and after they enter the country. As Dhakshayini Sooriyakumaran at the Australasian Centre for Corporate Responsibility writes: 'Rapidly developing surveillance methods are helping governments keep "undesirable" migrants and refugees outside of their countries' borders, and internal "undesirables" – members of minority communities and the poor among others – inside prisons, detention centres and racialised ghettos'.[102]

Rise of xenophobia and consequences of systemic racism

Some responses to the virus fuel the narrative of migrants as a threat. On 8 May UN Secretary-General António Guterres remarked that 'the pandemic continues to unleash a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering', pointing to many examples, including migrants and refugees being vilified as a source of the virus.[103]

Since Covid-19 originated in China, there have been many incidents of anti-Chinese and broader anti-Asian verbal and physical assaults, exclusion and taunting.[104] Usually, certain media outlets or organisations were responsible, but some governments have also acted in this way. At the end of February, the Israeli government ordered all South Koreans to be flown out of the country.[105] In Brazil, the education minister tweeted the suggestion that China was responsible for the Covid-19 pandemic, standing by his use of an anti-Chinese slur.[106] The Iranian government, which was badly affected, claimed that 'Zionist elements developed a deadlier strain of coronavirus against Iran'.[107]

In China, prejudice against African nationals, prompted by actions such as 'the local government in Guangzhou implementing surveillance, conducting compulsory testing and enforcing a 14-day quarantine for all African nationals', resulted in them being evicted from their homes, racist language and refusal of entry to hospitals, supermarkets and other places.[108]

The Chilean government and some of the media linked Covid-19 to irregular migration, prompting xenophobic attacks on migrants.[109] US President Trump, who spread the debunked conspiracy theory that the virus originated in a Chinese government lab, suspended even legal immigration in April to 'protect American workers' as part of his re-election campaign.[110]

In Hungary, the government extended the 'crisis situation due to mass migration' (the eighth since 2015) referring to 'the new migratory waves coming from Turkey, with their security and epidemiological risks'. The blaming of migrants started when the first confirmed cases in the country were Iranian medical students, who were arrested and to be deported with a three-year re-entry ban.[111] In many other European countries, far-right politicians have blamed migrants for the spread of Covid-19 and demanded draconian measures against them, including detention and deportation.[112] In Italy, the right-wing leader and former deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini linked the outbreak of the virus to the arrival of refugees, and far-right parties in France, Germany and Spain were the first to call for complete border closures.[113] Anti-immigrant rhetoric accompanies the far-right activities and responses to Covid-19, including and in some cases have also been at the forefront of (violent) anti-lockdown demonstrations, teaming up with all kinds of conspiracy thinkers, creating a virulent mix of misinformation, racism and nationalism, often fuelled by social media.[114]

Folashade Ajayi and Laura Westerveen at the Institute for European Studies argue that 'Covid-19 amplifies the structural inequalities experienced by minorities in Europe as a consequence of structural racism', and that 'these inequalities', such as overrepresentation 'in the least-valued sectors of employment […] in which working from home and protective self-isolation if hardly possible', 'translate into more exposure to Covid-19 putting minorities' lives at risk'.[115]

The border–industrial complex

Since 2015, militarised borders, new technologies for border control and the steady outsourcing of the detention and deportation of migrants have hugely expanded. A wide range of military and security companies have reaped the benefits and sought to further increase their market through extensive lobbying and contacts with policy-makers and border and migration authorities, portraying migration as a security threat, while at the same time providing the arms and equipment for wars, repression and human rights violations that fuel displacement and migration.[116]

The global economic crisis arising from the pandemic will likely lead to widespread austerity measures. Governments have closed their borders, strengthened border security and surveillance and adopted new technologies and tools for border control. Even with a global economic crisis or depression, the demand for new equipment and services will probably grow for years to come.

Border security and the military and security industry

It is unlikely that we will return to the pre-pandemic border situation, and many already militarised borders will see extra patrols, controls and/or the use of more surveillance, monitoring and detection technology. While this is part of a longer-term process that initiated long before Covid-19, governments have continued to purchase equipment for border security during the pandemic.

The US CBP agency spent $47.4 million in early May to buy two new border-patrol aircrafts, Beechcraft King Air 350CER from Textron to join its fleet of 23, to be modified by Sierra Nevada Corporation.[117] Since the outbreak of Covid-19 in the US, CBP and the Army Corps of Engineers spent over $100 million on surveillance systems, handguns, computer services and a new border patrol station.[118] In Europe, Greece started leasing Heron UAVs for border patrols from Israeli

Aerospace Industries (IAI) in May.[119] Yair Kulas at the Israel Ministry of Defence, said: 'We see great importance in the choice made by Greece to equip its forces with an Israeli system, particularly during the global corona crisis'.[120]

In April Italy concluded a €1.66 million contract with the Italian maritime safety company MED to supply six boats to the Libyan Coast Guard, paid by the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa.[121] Turkey issued a tender for an Electro Optical Border Surveillance System on 13 March. The EU will fund 85 per cent of the purchase, under its Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA II).[122]

The Royal Australian Navy awarded a A$324 million contract to Austal to design and build six boats for border patrols. The CEO of Austal, David Singleton, praised the 'clear commitment by the Australian Government to strengthen Australia's sovereign shipbuilding industry during a challenging global environment, brought on by the Coronavirus pandemic'.[123]

Increasing EU budgets for border security

As the EU is still discussing the new Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF), its 2021–2027 budget, the arms companies that most profit from an ever more militarised European border security intensified lobbying for more EU military and security funding during the Covid-19 crisis. On 1 April, representatives from seven arms companies – including Airbus, Leonardo and Indra, and lobby organisation Aerospace and Defence Industries of Europe (ASD) – held a teleconference with Thierry Breton, the European Commissioner for the Internal Market, on 'Covid-19 & its impact on the Aeronautic (civil and defence) industry'.[124] Until he became Commissioner in October 2019, Breton was the CEO of Atos, an IT company with a broad portfolio including defence and (border) security.[125]

On 25 May the EC published a new proposal for the MFF, 'The EU budget powering the recovery plan for Europe' with much higher budgets for the European Defence Fund (EDF), the Integrated Border Management Fund (IBMF) and Frontex, than in the pre-pandemic discussions. The Commission maintains that these budgets should be 'strengthened to allow them to play their full role in making the Union more resilient and addressing challenges that have been heightened by the pandemic and its consequences'.[126] It proposed €9 billion for the EDF for the research, development and design of new weapons, including for border security.

The IBMF is the successor of the current Internal Security Fund – Borders, to support member states' efforts to strengthen border security, including the purchase of new equipment and services, for which the EC aims to reserve €12.5 billion. This surpassed the request for €9.3 billion by the European Organisation for Security (EOS) in late 2019, which stated that 'Europe needs to increase its resilience against present and future threats, both of natural and malicious origin' and that 'the EU will need to manage its external borders to prevent the uncontrolled entry of people infected by transmissible pathogens'.[127]

Finally, the EC proposes a budget of €7.5 billion for Frontex, slightly more than the proposal discussed at the end of 2019. Frontex is already planning to spend the €2.2 billion earmarked for equipment leasing and purchases.[128]

Border walls

The South African government announced in March that it would spend about €1.94 million to erect or repair 40 km of fence along its border with Zimbabwe to stop the spread of Covid-19. Public Works Minister Patricia de Lille invoked emergency procurement procedures, stating: 'This is to ensure that no undocumented or infected persons cross into the country and vice-versa'.[129] The construction by Magwa Construction (trading name of Caledon River Properties (Pty) Ltd) was completed at the end of April.[130]

Communities on the US side of the border with Mexico were highly critical of the companies building parts of the border wall. In Ajo (Arizona) residents witnessed SLSCO construction workers defying orders to stay at home, partying and shopping in large groups while workers travelled long distances to go home at weekends.[131]

US agencies have issued new contracts worth over $2.3 billion to build parts of the border wall since the start of the Covid-19 crisis, including the largest single such contract worth almost $1.28 billion to the Fisher Sand and Gravel issued by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.[132] Noah Shachtman of the Daily Beast noted that two months earlier the army asked for an extra billion dollars to handle Covid-19 in its ranks. Because of this 'shortage' the Defence Department withheld funding from a 'lab that conducts cutting-edge work on infectious diseases'.[133]

Border control

Many of the companies with large contracts for surveilling, monitoring and tracking migrants broadened their portfolios to use these technologies for health and policing related to Covid-19. Especially since the 2015 so-called 'refugee crisis', 'tech companies and research consortiums pushed to develop projects using new data sources to predict movements of migrants into Europe', ranging from 'broad efforts to extract intelligence from public social media profiles by hand, to more complex automated manipulation of big data sets through image recognition and machine learning'. With the pandemic, these companies have new opportunities to sell the same technologies.[134]

On 11 March the controversial UK government adviser Dominic Cummings met with tech companies with experience in the field of border control, such as Amazon, Google, Microsoft and Palantir, talked about 'what they could do to help model and track the disease and the impact of government interventions'.[135] Palantir has a history of secretive contracts with military and security actors, including with ICE for selecting and targeting [undocumented] migrants for arrest, detention and deportation, based on creating and analysing profiles with personal information.[136] It has used the Covid-19 crisis to improve its image by working in health services with some 12 governments, including over $30 million in contracts with US authorities.[137] In the UK Palantir has committed 45 engineers to a National Health Service (NHS) project that also uses the services of Amazon and Microsoft to predict surges in the need for medical assistance during the crisis.[138]

ABI Research predicts a drop of $2 billion in the market for biometric devices in 2020, but that changes to respond to the Covid-19 crisis will 'give a boost to the face recognition technologies market going forward'.[139] Some companies swiftly adapted versions of biometric devices, such as the German company DERMALOG, which developed a biometric border-control system with integrated fever detection, currently being tested at Bangkok's international airport.[140]

On 16 April, the EU concluded a €302.6 million framework contract with identity security and IT companies Sopra Steria and IDEMIA to develop the biometrics part of its Entry Exit System, which controls the time and place of everyone who enters or leaves a member state, and its future shared Biometrics Matching System, which will allow the EU and member states to simultaneously search multiple databases and cross-check identities with biometric data.[141] This is one of the largest European contracts ever awarded in the field of biometric identity applications.

Detention and deportations

Private prison contractors keep getting new contracts despite their clear failure to work with vulnerable people during the pandemic, and the huge problems arising from outsourcing migrant detention. On 20 May ICE awarded GEO Group a $5.3 million contract for detention and transportation services. In mid-March it was paid $2.1 million for services at the Rio Grande detention centre in Laredo, Texas.[142] A few weeks later, detained migrants said that 'they have gone more than a week without any access to soap, that ICE officers do not wear masks or gloves, and that detained individuals are forced to stay in dangerously overcrowded rooms'.[143] At the same time, CoreCivic concluded a $16 million contract with ICE for detention and related services at the Houston Contract Detention Facility in Texas.[144] At the end of March MVM, a private security company obtained a new contract for a potential $744 million for transporting detained migrant families and unaccompanied children, of which $61.3 million had been paid by the end of May.[145]

There are no signs of any change in detention and deportation regimes in the long term, nor in continued outsourcing. In addition to the injustice of locking up and deporting refugees and migrants, many will remain in the hands of private contractors, whose half-hearted measures to contain the spread of the virus appear to be aimed at maximising profits – making any serious measures to prevent or limit the risks of any future health crises unlikely.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has had devastating consequences for refugees and migrants. This briefing has shown the many ways in which they are directly affected by the virus, as well as by government policies, measures and a general lack of care for their health and wellbeing. Borders have been closed, applying for asylum has been suspended, detention and deportations have led to a further spread of Covid-19, there have been raids and arrests of undocumented migrants, migrant workers and migrant communities have faced job losses, unsafe working and living conditions and a lack of access to medical and other support. In many cases, migrants and settled communities have been vilified and blamed for the spread of the virus, targetted by the xenophobic attacks of governments, far-right parties and parts of the public and social media. Only when they are needed as underpaid and undervalued workers to keep economies and health services running are they reluctantly offered to stay for the time being.

It seems clear that constraints on cross-border travel and other measures to restrict migration introduced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic will remain in place, with an expanding security apparatus to back them up. Exemptions will likely be made to allow tourists, the wealthy, and other 'desirable' travellers, for whom the smooth crossing of borders can go on as before.

Meanwhile, governments all over the world, particularly in Australia, Europe and the US, continue to spend enormous sums on border security and control equipment and services, planning to further increase budgets in the coming years. This is music to the ears of the military and security companies which are active in the diverse sectors connected to borders and migration. Once again, they are likely to be among the very few winners of increasingly restrictive policies targeting vulnerable people on the move.

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