

# Under the Mask

AFSC dialogue series about shrinking civic space during COVID-19

## REPORT THREE

Closed Borders

Tuesday July 21st 2020

The third of the four webinars in the AFSC 'Under the Mask' series considered migration and militarized borders under COVID-19. The convening was attended by 56 participants from around the globe, receiving simultaneous interpretation in Bahasa Indonesia, Spanish, and French.

*We heard from:*

**Aung Kway Moe**, peacebuilder, humanitarian worker, and human rights advocate from Myanmar.

**Mohamed Omran**, founder and executive director of Democratic Transition and Human Rights Support Center.

**Pedro Rios**, director of U.S./Mexico Border Program, American Friends Service Committee.

**Rita Robels**, researcher and migration expert with the Fray Matías de Córdoba Center for Human Rights in Mexico.

Below is a summary of the presentations and the small group discussions that followed.

## 1.

### What does border militarization look like under COVID, and how are migrants and refugees affected?

The dominant discourse today, when it comes to borders and migration, tends to be centered around a discourse of "security." The right has continually presented migration and open borders as a threat, and **now the fear that migrants may bring COVID-19 with them across borders is further pushing border militarization.** As an example, in Zimbabwe, refugees are stigmatized and blamed for bringing COVID-19 into the country. In the U.S., racism towards Asian-Americans has increased; in South Africa, there have been a number of xenophobic attacks; and in Costa Rica, a poll showed a 62% increase in xenophobia.

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South of the border in Mexico, all migrants are assumed to be en route to the U.S., are classified as economic migrants, and have been identified as the greatest risk to Mexican National Security. A joint agreement between Mexico and the U.S. meant by May 2019, 125,000 people coming from Mexico were detained in the U.S., and by January 2020 this number had reached 14,807. However, as the border shuts down, ostensibly due to COVID-19, migrants are being sent to Baja California, Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Sonora. Many families and children end up living in makeshift camps, without adequate access to water, food, medical care, and proper sanitation, and at least 816 migrants have been assaulted, raped, or killed while waiting in Mexico for the resolution of their asylum process. 6,000 members of the National Guard have been deployed to the Southern border.

**—From the presentation of Rita Robles**

**Both Europe and the U.S. have, for decades, enacted policies of pushing their own borders further away, encouraging neighboring countries to close their borders.** In this way Europe has pushed for and supported refugee intake and camps in Turkey and North Africa, and the U.S. has supported the militarization of Mexico's southern border as well as the U.S.-Mexico border. This leads to a huge number of refugees and migrants in these “third party” countries who now need to deal with the spread of a pandemic. Refugee camps and other migrant areas are especially vulnerable to the virus due to dense populations making social distancing virtually impossible, poor hygienic conditions, and limited access to health care. The spread of the virus is also exacerbated by conditions of incarceration, and so in U.S. detention centers, for example, this is a real concern.

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The European countries succeed in controlling the eastern entrance to Europe through an agreement with Turkey to receive refugees migrating through Libya. The EU wanted to replicate this with Egypt and Morocco in 2016, but the model was strongly rejected. Many migrants die in transit, or simply disappear from detention centers in Libya and other Arab countries. They are sold, providing an income source for traffickers, especially rife in Libya. Due to COVID-19, civilians, refugees and asylum seekers face challenges in travelling, accessing basic materials and services, or finding work, with the prices of foodstuffs, fuel, and house rents rising to record levels.

**—From the presentation of Mohamed Omran**

**Not only are host countries failing to allocate resources to migrant communities during the pandemic, because they are prioritizing their own citizens, but in some cases, they are also worsening conditions.** As an example, in Zimbabwe, the government has continued to demolish houses in migrant communities during the pandemic, making ideas like “shelter at home” impossible. In many places, like in Jordan with Syrian refugees, the work of NGOs that used to provide aid to refugees has been stopped by the government as movement is restricted. In addition, while many people around the world are struggling financially due to lack of work and the economic crisis COVID-19 brings, **undocumented people receive none of the little support states are offering their citizens.**

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There are a million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Hundreds of thousands have arrived, and continue to arrive, by sea from Myanmar. They were in a dire situation before COVID-19, but now the government has cut the internet, so it’s hard to get information about what is happening. The camps are cramped. People don’t have masks, can’t distance, and don’t have access to soap and water. Those trying to come home to reunite with their families face tough conditions, and now can’t move at all.

**—From the presentation of Aung Kway Moe**

More troops have been deployed on borders in the Middle East and elsewhere, and there is a clear fear that this increased militarization won’t be reversed. It also does not stop at the borders, as we see in U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents being used to control protest in Portland, Oregon – border control is being used for domestic political purposes. It is important to note this over-militarization of borders is racialized. The U.S., during the pandemic, is increasing troops on its southern border, but not on its northern one, even though initially there were far fewer COVID-19 cases in Mexico than in Canada.

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President Trump continues to pour millions into the expansion of the wall along the border, funds that could be used to address COVID-19 in a humane way. Further, Border Patrol agents accustomed to using violence against migrants and border community members have been arresting people in areas beyond their jurisdiction for non-immigration offenses. The Border Patrol is permitted to shoot into Mexico, and not be held accountable for those they kill. Trump is threatening to deploy the Border Patrol to suppress protests in cities around the U.S.

**—From the presentation of Pedro Rios**

And while most borders are being closed due to the pandemic, some borders are not, purely to allow deportations of migrants and refugees to continue. Mexico is one of these rare countries. They are accelerating the implementation of deportation policies, or leaving people stranded at borders so that they will “choose” to return to their home country. With worsening conditions in refugee and migrant areas, **people “self-deport,” meaning they opt to go back to the place they fled from because the host countries’ conditions are even worse.** This is also happening in Myanmar, Somalia, and Kenya.

## 2.

### What can civil society do?

There is an opportunity with this global pandemic. It has caused people to understand that there must be a holistic response to address the needs that arise from it – a response that looks at economic, social, and health considerations, as well as a response that looks at the needs of all parts of society. **The pandemic will continue to spread if there isn't a response that takes into consideration all these elements – a holistic approach that as civil society we have been advocating for a very long time.** This requires us to conduct a stakeholder analysis, so as to identify with whom we should work.

Mainstream media discourse is xenophobic, and as the media is usually run by capital, we cannot expect it to change. One idea would be to create regional media observatories that look at the status of refugee and migrant communities regionally, and not just in each locality, tell their stories and find ways to respond to their needs collectively.

There are also opportunities for advocacy with different regional bodies such as the African Union, the EU, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), etc., as **we must see any work around borders and migration as a regional issue, and not confine ourselves to engaging in debates restricted by geographical borders.**

Finally, there is a lot to learn from migrant communities themselves. These are often communities that have learned, from necessity, to organize their own community care structures. As an example, the Shuefat refugee camp in East Jerusalem created their own isolation facility for people who would need to be quarantined. There are many examples of similar structures for food sharing, communal education, and more. **With states going into deep economic crisis, migrant and refugee communities that have already created these internal non-state dependent structures may be able to guide other communities.**

## 3.

### Tools and resources:

- [Fighting COVID-19, Building Peace – a civil society perspective. What Local Peacebuilders Say about COVID-19, Civic Space, Fragility and Drivers of Conflict](#)
- [Making a Community Action Net \(work\): organizing in the times of COVID-19](#)
- [COVID-19 Detention Platform: Covid-19 Global Immigration Detention Platform](#)