

## Joint Statement

### Strengthen Services, Protections for Returned Migrant Workers

Phnom Penh, 07 October 2025

At least 900,000 Cambodians have returned from Thailand since the border conflict escalated on 24 July 2025, according to government estimates.<sup>1</sup> This surge far exceeds the exodus during the COVID-19 period, when roughly 260,000 migrants returned, and is already proving to be a strain on Cambodia's economy and the Cambodian people's well-being.

Before the border conflict, remittances from Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand were a significant contributor to Cambodia's GDP: workers sent home several hundreds of dollars per month to their families in Cambodia, totalling close to US\$3 billion in 2024.<sup>2</sup> Government data indicates that around 80% of returnees are re-entering households with less than one hectare of agricultural land per household member, limiting the viability of self-employed farming and creating urgent pressure for wage employment and other livelihood options.

In August 2025, CENTRAL completed a needs assessment of over 700 returned migrants in Battambang, Banteay Meanchey, Oddar Meanchey, Siem Reap, Preah Vihear, Koh Kong and Pailin. The results were clear: migrants have overwhelmingly returned to rural provinces (approximately 70% to Banteay Meanchey and Battambang) and are in critical need of both food and work. As in other mass exodus events, this situation has the potential to create devastating impacts on an already strained employment and economic environment.

First, there are simply not enough jobs for everyone in need. The Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training reported in early August 2025 that there were at least 190,000 jobs available across Cambodia, mostly in manufacturing and the service industry. Second, most of the jobs that do exist are in and around Phnom Penh and other urban centres, while most returned migrants are living in provinces along the Cambodia-Thai border. Third, most of the advertised jobs are in the manufacturing sector, while most returned migrant workers have developed skills in construction and large-scale agriculture work to respond to the demands of Thailand. It will be a challenge for many of them to find work utilising their skills.

In addition, women accounted for about 406 of the 803 respondents (just over 50 percent) within CENTRAL's assessment, making them a slight majority of the surveyed returnees. Many of these women had worked in domestic service, caregiving, or seafood-processing in Thailand and came back with fewer transferable skills for the Cambodian labour market. Programmes that incentivise private-sector hiring should therefore include dedicated quotas for women, alongside measures such as safe worksites, equal pay, and access to childcare, to ensure they can benefit equally from new opportunities. Without such provisions, women risk being left out of recovery efforts and may face renewed pressure to migrate through unsafe channels.

This is a profound challenge that demands coordinated action by the government, the private sector, and civil society to secure decent livelihoods for returning migrant workers. In that spirit, we would like to endorse and further advocate for several policy ideas and recommendations raised in a [recent report from the Cambodia Development Resource Institute \(CDRI\)](#), while also advancing several additional recommendations of our own.

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<sup>1</sup>[https://cdri.org.kh/storage/pdf/RPN2\\_v2\\_1757326478.pdf](https://cdri.org.kh/storage/pdf/RPN2_v2_1757326478.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> MoLVT figure is 2.95 billion for 2024

<https://english.news.cn/asiapacific/20250301/cba8216b1cda4e7d860ac64934249c2a/c.html?utm>

**Recommendation 1: Rapidly expand social protection for returnee households.** CDRI’s Rapid Policy Note 02 warns that without social protection, even short spells of unemployment can push returnees into deeper hardship. The government should immediately extend and top-up cash assistance for households with returning migrant members; complement this with time-bound food security support (rice and other staples, seed and input kits where relevant), and extend health coverage and fee waivers for essential services where relevant. This should be done by prioritising border provinces and making enrolment simple at border checkpoints and commune offices, using streamlined verification (border-crossing records plus commune certification) and grievance redress to prevent exclusion. Payments should be frequent (weekly/bi-weekly) during the first 8–12 weeks, then taper as employment stabilises, with case management for high-risk households (female-headed, indebted, or with dependents). These measures will help families meet basic needs, avoid negative coping (distress sales, school dropouts), and bridge the transition to more durable livelihoods.

**Recommendation 2: Incentivise private sector hiring of returnees.** Create a temporary quota-hire scheme to encourage private enterprises in labour-absorbing sectors, such as construction, agro-processing, logistics, and infrastructure maintenance, to employ returned migrants. Participating firms would be offered time-bound tax incentives or partial wage subsidies to offset hiring costs and expand job opportunities quickly. Public infrastructure contracts, such as rural road repairs or irrigation upgrades, could include mandatory returnee-hire quotas drawn from a transparent IDPoor-linked registry, with reserved places for women, safe worksites, and digital wage payments to ensure fast, accountable delivery. This approach leverages the capacity of private companies to generate jobs at scale, supports skills transfer and longer-term retention, and reduces the risks of nepotism or leakage that can arise in fully public programmes.

**Recommendation 3: Quickly recognize skills, fund short-term upskilling, and tax-finance health cover for returnees.** Build on the ongoing MLVT–ILO skills certification drive by scaling a recognition of prior learning programs so experienced migrants can be formally certified without re-training. We recommend deploying mobile assessors in border provinces, waiving fees, and issuing certificates within days. For returnees without marketable skills, provide small, rapid grants/tuition vouchers plus short stipends for 6–8-week vocational modules aligned with near-term demand (e.g., construction, irrigation O&M, agro-processing, care services). To protect household finances and encourage formal registration, make NSSF health coverage temporarily tax-financed for registered returnee workers (no member contributions or co-pays for 6–12 months), with a clear sunset and an “on-ramp” to contributory status as incomes recover. Given the Royal Government’s stated fiscal space and the outsized role remittances have played in the economy, this time-bound package is essential to stabilize consumption, reduce exploitation risk, and sustain social cohesion—while creating a verified registry of returnees that links people to jobs, training, and benefits.

**Recommendation 4: Impose a temporary debt moratorium for returnee households.** At least half of returning migrants reported anxiety about meeting loan repayments as per CENTRAL’s needs assessment. Building on lessons from the COVID-19 response, debt-responsive interventions should be designed to prioritise those experiencing the most severe debt distress. The National Bank of Cambodia could collaborate with commercial banks and MFIs to implement temporary repayment holidays, low-interest refinancing, or targeted cash transfers tied to household debt levels. Linking financial support to verified debt profiles would ensure that the most vulnerable families receive immediate relief, stabilising their household economies and reducing pressure to re-migrate for income. Such an approach would help financial institutions act more quickly and effectively, safeguarding both borrowers and lenders while mitigating the wider economic and social risks identified in this assessment. Prompt action would help prevent distressed land sales, school dropouts, and rising non-performing loans, reducing risks for both households and the financial sector.

**Recommendation 5: Streamline legal documentation and safe-migration pathways to deter irregular re-entry.** CENTRAL’s needs assessment shows at least half of returnees are worried about making loan payments, and many migrants who do not wish to immediately go back to Thailand may nonetheless feel pushed toward risky, irregular crossings, and exploitation. In the next 60–90 days, the Ministry of Interior’s Department of Identification should fast-track a one-stop documentation drive to issue or renew passports, national IDs, family books, and residence certificates through mobile teams in border provinces; waive or subsidize fees for returnee households; grant a time-limited amnesty for expired documents/permits; offer digital pre-registration and simple checklists at commune offices; and provide on-site legal aid and hotline referrals. In line with migrant workers linked-debt concerns, the government should also consider a short-term price reduction for documents to encourage legal enforcement. We also advocate for expanding safe-migration channels for when legal crossings resume, which should include enforcing zero- or capped-fee recruitment enforced by both governments, publishing a public registry of licensed recruiters with sanctions for violators, requiring pre-departure rights briefings and written contracts, and opening an accessible complaints mechanism. Pair this with targeted anti-trafficking outreach at transport hubs and high-risk communes, plus case screening and referral. Set clear 90-day targets (e.g., cut average passport processing times, document a high share of returnee households, and register all recruiters operating in border areas) to stabilize households now and prevent a surge in irregular migration later.

This is a massive challenge for all Cambodian households and institutions. The government should lead a response that meets the needs of returned migrant households. They cannot afford inaction. We encourage the government to enact the above recommendations as quickly as possible, and we believe that civil society and the private sector should stand ready to support the above actions in any way possible.

*This statement is endorsed by:*

1. Banteay Srei
2. Building and Wood Workers’ Trade Union Federation of Cambodia (BWTUC)
3. Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions (CATU)
4. Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR)
5. Cambodian Food and Service Workers’ Federation (CFSWF)
6. Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC)
7. Cambodia Informal Economy Reinforce Association (CIERA)
8. Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
9. Cambodian Tourism Workers Union Federation (CTWUF)
10. Cambodian Youth Network (CYN)
11. Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (CENTRAL)
12. Free and Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA)
13. Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC)
14. Independent Trade Union Federation (FUFI)
15. Klahaan Organisation
16. Labor Rights Supported Union of Khmer Employees of NagaWorld (LRSU)
17. Partnership of Environment and Development Organization (PED Cambodia)
18. The Cambodian NGO Committee on CEDAW (NGO-CEDAW)