

CENTER FOR ALLIANCE OF LABOR AND HUMAN RIGHTS



**FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE:
EXPERIENCES OF
CAMBODIAN RETURNEES
FROM THAILAND DURING
BORDER TENSIONS**

**AN IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF
RETURN MIGRATION**

MARCH 2026

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between July and December 2025, renewed border tensions between Cambodia and Thailand triggered one of the most sudden and large-scale returns of Cambodian migrant workers since the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training, at least 900,000 Cambodians returned from Thailand during this period, with peak movements occurring from July through August. Many returned abruptly, without savings, documentation, or access to support.

This study, *From Policy to Practice: Experiences of Cambodian Returnees from Thailand during Border Tensions*, assesses how returnees navigated the return process, the costs and risks they faced, and their conditions after return. It examines whether existing policy responses aligned with lived realities and identifies gaps in emergency response, reintegration support, and migration governance.

The impact assessment is based on a household survey of 527 returned migrant workers across 11 provinces, seven focus group discussions, and follow-up interviews conducted after renewed hostilities in December 2025, building on an earlier Rapid Needs Assessment conducted in August 2025.

Findings

1. Return was crisis-driven and financially destabilising.

Returns were overwhelmingly self-financed, often involving families rather than individuals. Average transport and food costs during return were high, and unofficial fees at border points were common. For 8% of respondents, the act of returning directly generated new debt.



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2. Assistance coverage was limited and narrowly focused.

Only 30.5% of returnees received any assistance during or after return. Support was dominated by short-term food aid and transportation, primarily provided by the Cambodian government. Access to cash assistance, health care, psychosocial support, livelihood assistance, or vocational training was extremely rare.

3. Debt is the central driver of vulnerability.

71% of returnees were in debt, with an average household debt of USD 5,500 and total reported debt exceeding USD 2 million across the sample. 85% of indebted households were unable to keep up with repayments. Debt directly affected food consumption, schooling, mental health, and future migration decisions.

4. Livelihood options in Cambodia remain unstable and unsafe.

Returnees reported limited access to decent work. Attempts to find employment were often marked by non-payment of wages, unsafe conditions, verbal abuse, or misleading job offers. Average post-return household income (\approx USD 64/month) fell far below average expenses (\approx USD 173/month).

5. Remigration pressure is increasing, not decreasing.

53% of respondents plan to migrate again, primarily to Thailand, a sharp rise from 13% in August 2025. Persistent debt, lack of local jobs, and low wages are driving renewed migration intentions, including through risky or irregular channels.

6. Renewed hostilities in December 2025 deteriorated already fragile living conditions.

Follow-up interviews indicate heightened fear, further income loss, worsening food insecurity, and intensified debt stress. Mobility has become



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more constrained, communities are described as “quiet,” and women are bearing disproportionate responsibility for managing household finances and loan relations.

Recommendations

The evidence points to an urgent need to move beyond ad hoc emergency responses toward time-bound stabilisation and recovery measures:

1. Expand temporary social protection for returnee households, including cash assistance, food support, and health fee waivers, prioritising vulnerable households in high-return and border provinces.
2. Accelerate employment recovery through public–private hiring incentives in labour-absorbing sectors and safe, monitored worksites.
3. Fast-track skills recognition and short-cycle training, paired with temporary health coverage to reduce immediate financial pressure.
4. Implement targeted debt relief, including temporary moratoria, restructuring, or refinancing for returnee households at risk of land loss or default.
5. Strengthen safe-migration pathways and streamline documentation services to reduce incentives for irregular and unsafe remigration once borders reopen.

Without coordinated action on livelihoods, debt, and social protection, many returnee households risk becoming trapped in cycles of insecurity and unsafe remigration. Addressing these challenges is essential not only for household welfare, but for labour-market stability and effective migration governance during periods of cross-border disruption.



INTRODUCTION

Since July 2025, the border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand has created the most sudden and large-scale return of Cambodian migrant workers since the COVID-19 pandemic. Between July and December 2025, shifting security conditions, temporary closures of key crossings, and inconsistent information on both sides of the border pushed thousands of Cambodian workers - many undocumented or in unstable employment - to return home abruptly. According to the Cambodian Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training, at least 900,000 Cambodians have returned from Thailand since the beginning of the tensions, with peak return movements occurring between July and August.¹ These returnees, many of whom are in debt, face bleak prospects for reintegration.

While official statements from the government have emphasised a commitment to orderly repatriation and support, the reality documented so far has revealed uneven assistance, confusion and growing anxiety among workers about employment, debt, and remigration options.

This study, *From Policy to Practice: Experiences of Cambodian Returnees from Thailand during Border Tensions*, seeks to understand how these workers actually navigated the return process, what conditions they face after arriving home, and whether the support measures described in national policies align with their lived experience. The assessment also aims to identify gaps in emergency preparedness, reintegration assistance, and labour-migration governance, especially for workers who lost jobs suddenly or were forced to use irregular routes due to border limitations.

^[1] <https://cambodianess.com/article/driven-home-why-cambodian-migrant-workers-are-fleeing-thailand>



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In August, CENTRAL conducted a rapid assessment with over 800 returned workers in seven provinces, finding that the majority had returned to Banteay Meanchey and Battambang, where they now confront limited access to food, livelihood, and state assistance. Informal or day-labour work is often the only option, with many migrants reporting a lack of job-matching support and exclusion from social protection systems.

Building on preliminary findings from our August 2025 Rapid Needs Assessment, which highlighted income loss, food insecurity, heightened debt burdens, and uncertainty over future migration, this study expands the evidence base through a survey conducted in October across 11 provinces, complemented by focus group discussions (FGDs) in November, and follow-up interviews after the renewal of hostilities in December 2025.

The objective of this report is not only to document return migrant needs but also to generate credible, people-centred data that can be used in policy dialogue with government agencies, local authorities, development partners, and civil society actors engaging in migration governance and labour protection.





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Rapid Needs Assessment (August 2025): Key findings

In August 2025, CENTRAL conducted a Rapid Needs Assessment during the peak period of return migration from Thailand to Cambodia. The quantitative assessment covered eight provinces, with the highest concentration of respondents in Banteay Meanchey and Kampong Thom and was complemented by qualitative interviews with targeted site observations at the Doung border checkpoint and in Koh Kong. A total of 815 interviews were conducted, representing 803 unique respondents across eight provinces. The largest proportions of respondents were from Banteay Meanchey (251) and Kampong Thom (221).

- Food security was the dominant immediate need. *Approximately 80% of respondents identified food assistance as their first priority, far exceeding needs related to employment (around 12%) and cash assistance (around 4%).*
- Livelihood insecurity was the key driver of (re-)migration pressure. While most returnees expressed a preference to remain in Cambodia, this was strongly conditional on access to stable and decent work. *57% planned to stay, 30% were undecided and dependent on short-term assistance, and 13% planned to return to Thailand.*
- Return migration imposed significant, debt-amplifying costs. Respondents reported paying between 500–5,000 THB to cross back into Cambodia, often via Dong checkpoint, in addition to onward transport costs (approximately 600 THB for travel and 300–600 THB for transporting belongings). *These expenses were frequently financed through borrowing, deepening household debt at the point of return.*
- Assistance coverage was extremely limited at the time of interviews. *Around 84% of respondents reported receiving no formal assistance, highlighting a critical protection and humanitarian gap during the most acute phase of return.*
- Protection risks increased alongside economic distress. *The lack of livelihoods and limited legal mobility heightened vulnerability to unsafe and irregular migration pathways, including deceptive and exploitative recruitment, notably into scam-related operations.*

Provincial vulnerabilities differed, underscoring the need for differentiated responses. Distinct patterns were observed across provinces, including combined food and employment needs in Banteay Meanchey; youth-dominated profiles and employment-first priorities in Kampong Thom; larger household sizes and heightened food insecurity in Preah Vihear; and gendered return patterns in Koh Kong and Siem Reap.



METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative tools to capture both the scale and depth of returnees' experiences. The methodology was developed by CENTRAL's dedicated research team, in coordination with our field partners, and with support from core donors.

Sampling Methods

A total target sample of 530 respondents was initially planned across 11 provinces with high concentrations of returnees: Banteay Meanchey, Battambang, Pursat, Kampong Thom, Siem Reap, Preah Vihear, Tbong Khmum, Kampong Cham, Prey Veng, Oddar Meanchey, and Pailin.

During fieldwork, several provinces experienced incomplete enumeration due to access challenges, resulting in an initial achieved sample of 399 respondents. To preserve analytical robustness, the team used a revised sampling plan, redistributing additional sample numbers to safer, more accessible provinces (e.g., Preah Vihear, Oddar Meanchey, Pailin), resulting in a final achieved sample of 527 respondents.

Sampling was primarily purposive, focusing on villages with verified returnees, with snowball tracing used where migrants had returned informally or dispersed to relatives' homes.

Data Collection Techniques

Household Survey

Enumerators conducted face-to-face interviews using a structured



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questionnaire covering: demographic and household composition, migration history and conditions of return, income, employment, and debt, access to assistance (government, NGO, community), border experiences during the conflict period, and safety risks and remigration intentions.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

To complement the survey of 527 individuals, seven FGDs were conducted with 50 individuals (29 female) in mid-October 2025, in Kampong Thom, Preah Vihear, Siem Reap and Banteay Meanchey to deepen understanding of: return journeys and decision-making, coping strategies, perceptions of policy responses, and expectations and recommendations for government action.

Research Validation Workshop

A research validation workshop was held on 28 November 2025 in Phnom Penh. The workshop brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, including representatives from relevant government ministries (such as the Ministry of Labor and Ministry of Interior), UN agencies, foreign embassies, development partners, civil society organizations, trade unions, Community-Based Safe Migrant Ambassadors (SMAs), and returned migrant workers themselves. The purpose of the workshop was to present the preliminary research findings, validate the data, and gather additional feedback to improve the accuracy and policy relevance of the final report.

During the workshop, CENTRAL researchers presented the study methodology and key findings, followed by a facilitated plenary discussion. SMAs and returned migrant workers shared first-hand experiences about the challenges faced during the mass return from Thailand, including difficult travel conditions, health problems after long journeys, discrimination and job loss in Thailand, debt burdens, and limited support



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upon returning to Cambodia. Participants also highlighted practical challenges encountered during the data collection process, such as locating migrant workers who had already left their villages again to search for work elsewhere.

Government representatives and other stakeholders responded to the findings by providing additional perspectives on employment opportunities, social protection programs, and migration documentation systems, while also raising questions about migration costs and data interpretation. Civil society participants emphasised the need for stronger emergency response systems, debt relief measures, financial literacy support, and improved access to legal migration channels. Feedback from all participants was recorded and incorporated into the final analysis to strengthen the validity and contextual accuracy of the research findings.

Follow-Up Interviews

In response to renewed border clashes between Cambodia and Thailand in December 2025, we conducted a limited round of nine follow-up interviews with six selected participants from the earlier focus group discussions and three community-based Safe Migration Ambassadors (SMAs) from Banteay Meanchey, Siem Reap and Kampong Thom in late December. The purpose was to capture updated, on-record information on how the escalation of tensions affected mobility, livelihoods, and household conditions after the initial survey period.

Short, structured follow-up interviews were used to document whether cross-border movement had effectively ceased, whether irregular crossings were still occurring, and how returnees - particularly women - were coping with increased care responsibilities, debt pressure, and livelihood risks. This targeted follow-up was not intended to generate new representative statistics, but to validate trends observed in the original study, strengthen



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the evidence base with time-sensitive insights, and ensure that advocacy messages reflect current realities on the ground.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed CENTRAL's internal ethical standards and good practice for research involving migrant workers:

- **Voluntary participation:** Respondents could decline to answer any question or end the interview at any time without consequence.
- **Informed consent:** Enumerators read a short, clear consent script in Khmer, including a separate request for audio-recording approval during FGDs.
- **Confidentiality:** No identifying information (names, specific workplaces, brokers, or employer details) is published. Raw data were stored securely and shared only within the research team.
- **Do-no-harm approach:** Enumerators avoided sensitive questions if participants appeared distressed, and no data collection was conducted in areas where active security incidents or evacuation orders were present.
- **Referral pathways:** In cases where participants disclosed severe hardship or safety concerns, enumerators provided information on locally accessible support services.

Limitations

Access constraints shaped both who could be interviewed and how. In some border areas, particularly where tensions escalated, enumerators were unable to remain on the ground for extended periods. In these areas,



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remote phone interviews were used, which limited the ability to observe non-verbal cues or verify certain details. Returnees who were more mobile, working informally, or living in temporary arrangements may also have been underrepresented.

The fluid security situation affected recall and reporting. Participants were interviewed soon after stressful events such as abrupt job loss, long travel routes, or exposure to armed clashes and border confusion. Their accounts reflect genuine lived experiences but may be influenced by stress, uncertainty, or rapidly changing information.

This study does not collect employer or government data to triangulate certain claims. Reports about employer decisions, border instructions, smuggling fees, or interactions with authorities rely solely on participant narratives. These provide essential insight into perceptions and lived realities but cannot be independently verified for each case.

The qualitative sample is intentionally small and purposive. The FGDs and follow-up interviews were designed to deepen understanding, not to provide statistically representative findings. As such, qualitative themes illuminate patterns and context but should not be interpreted as population-level estimates. Data collection occurred while migration pathways and policy signals, including Thai announcements regarding work permits and border management, were actively shifting. Because these changes continued after fieldwork, the findings represent a snapshot during the peak of return movements, not a full account of developments that have followed.

Despite these limitations, the combination of survey and qualitative data provides a picture of returnees' immediate needs, coping strategies, and perceptions of government responses during a rapidly evolving border crisis.

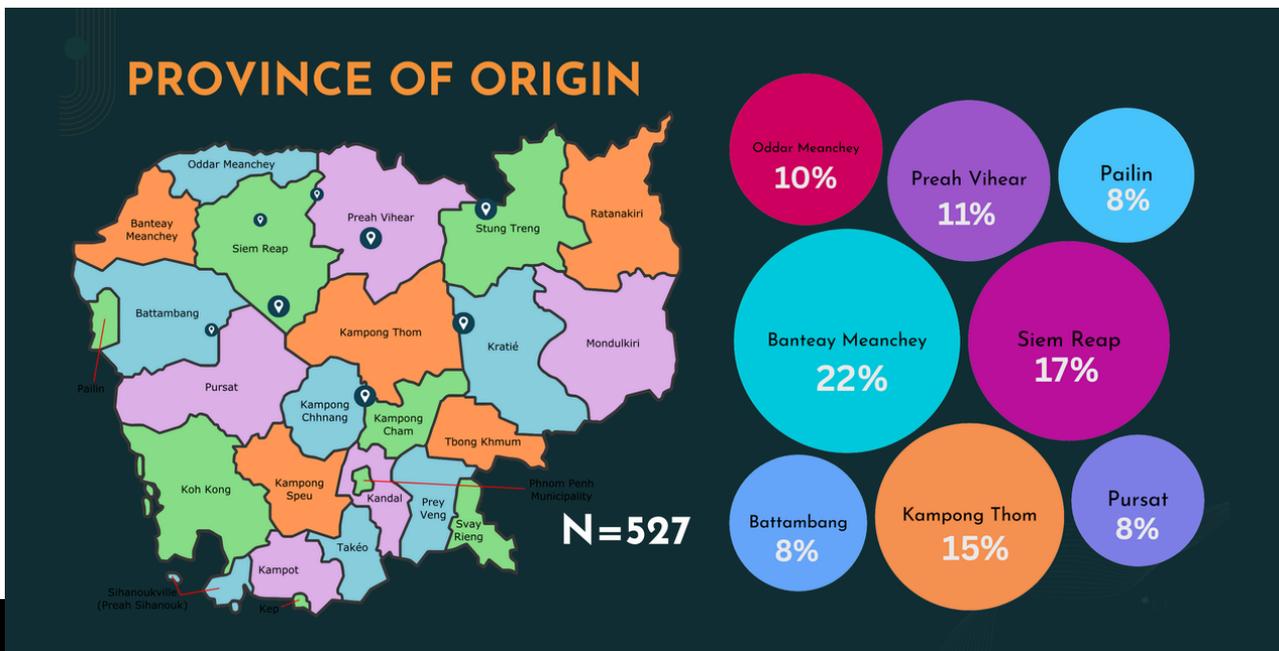


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SURVEY FINDINGS

The survey of 527 returned migrant workers, supported by focus group discussions across selected provinces, provides a cross-section of the Cambodians who returned during 2025 border tensions, the pressures shaping their return, and the challenges they now face in rebuilding their livelihoods.

Among the 527 respondents,² the largest proportion originated from the border province Banteay Meanchey (22%, n=116), followed by Siem Reap (17%, n=92) and Kampong Thom (15%, n=81). Smaller but still significant shares came from Preah Vihear (11%, n=60) and Oddar Meanchey (10%, n=53), while Battambang, Pailin, and Pursat each accounted for approximately 8% of respondents (n=43, 42, and 40, respectively).



^[2] All raw data is available upon request. Additionally, the earlier Rapid Needs Assessment conducted by CENTRAL in August 2025 documented province-specific patterns among returned migrant workers. Because the August assessment and the present survey used different sampling frames, instruments, and sample sizes, those findings are used in this report only as contextual background for the nationally aggregated results of this impact assessment.

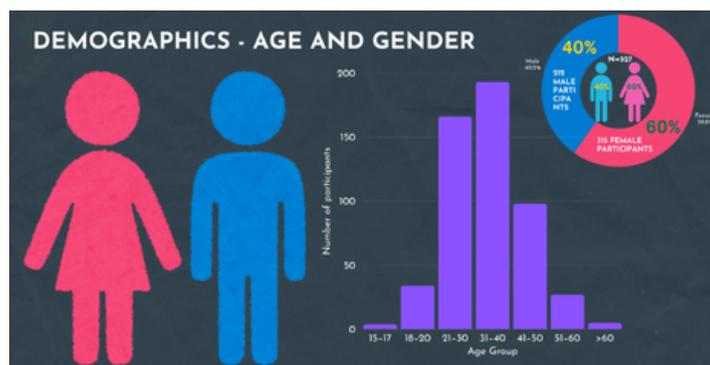


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Demographic Profile and Household Characteristics

The returnees included in the sample were overwhelmingly working-age adults supporting large households and possessing limited formal education. The largest age groups were 31–40 (37%, $n=193$) and 21–30 (31%, $n=166$), reflecting Thailand's reliance on mature, economically active Cambodian labour.

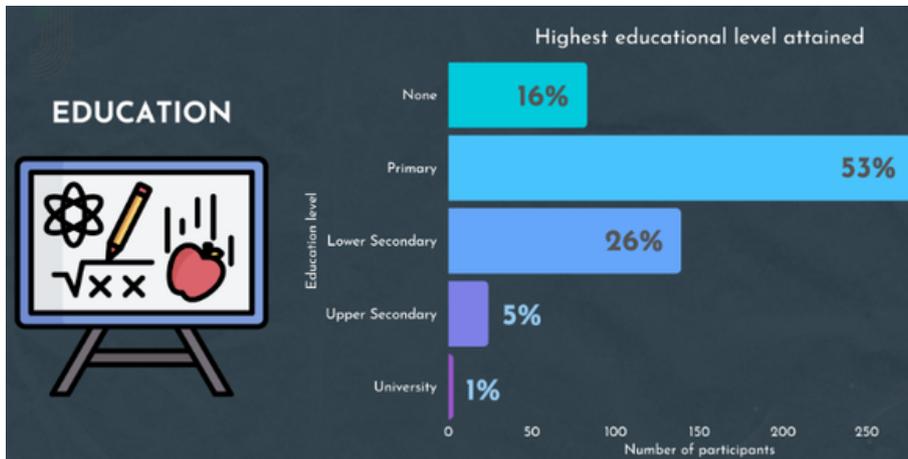
Women comprised 60% ($n=315$) of respondents, representing female migrant workers employed across construction, agriculture, industry, service work, and domestic labour. This gender distribution reflects the profile of returnees present in surveyed communities during the data-collection period rather than a targeted sampling strategy. Enumerators interviewed all eligible returnees encountered in selected villages. In several provinces, women were more likely to be present at home during daytime survey hours, while some male returnees were out doing informal work or had resumed short-term migration within the country in search of work opportunities.



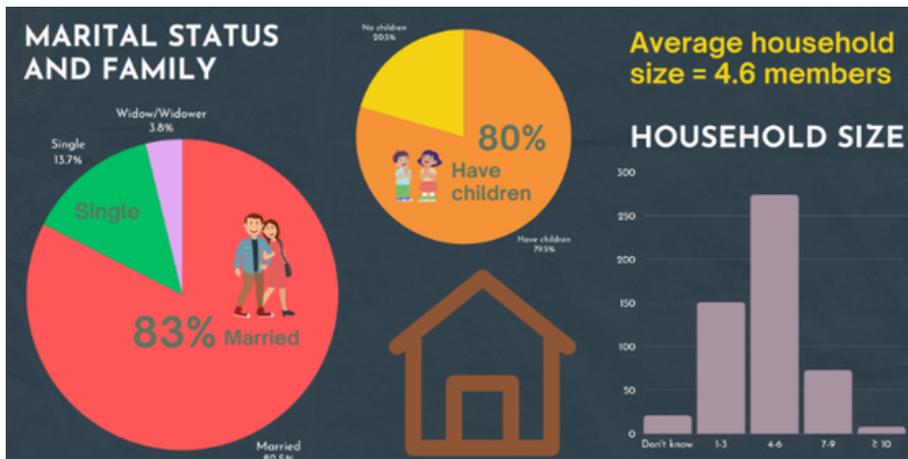
Educational attainment was low: 16% ($n=83$) of respondents reported having no schooling, and 53% ($n=278$) had only completed primary education. While 31% had completed some level of secondary education, university graduates represented just 1% of the sample. This indicates a labour force whose livelihood options in Cambodia remain narrow and largely informal.



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Family responsibilities were substantial; 83% (n= 435) were married, 80% (419) had children, and most households contained three to six dependents. These high dependency ratios amplify the economic strain experienced during crisis-driven return.



Reported figures show that average monthly household income was 261,505 KHR (approximately USD 64³), ranging from 20,000 KHR (~USD 5) to 3,000,000 KHR (~USD 730). In comparison, average monthly household expenses were substantially higher at 709,446 KHR (approximately USD 173), with reported values spanning from 50,000 KHR (~USD 12) to 5,000,000 KHR (~USD 1,220).

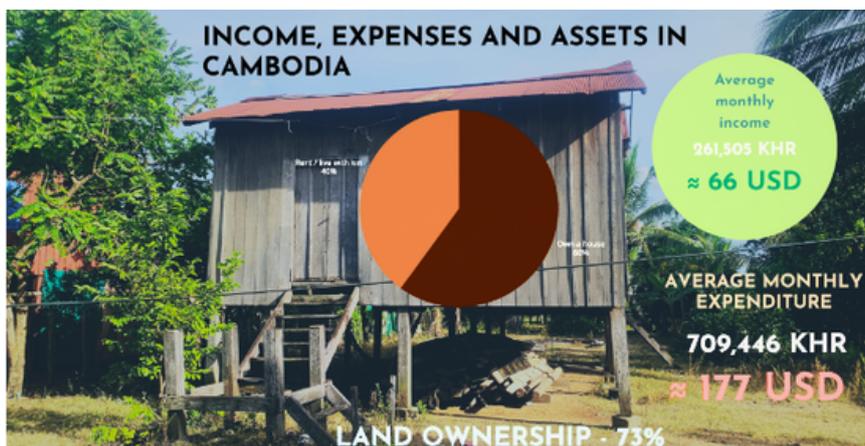
^[3] Based on an indicative exchange rate of ~4,100 KHR to USD.



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In terms of assets, 60% of respondents (n=316) reported owning their own house, while 40% (n=211) lived in rented accommodation or with relatives, and 73% (n=384) indicated they owned land compared to 27% (n=143) who reported having no land.

Two-thirds of respondents (66%, n=348) reported having been working with valid documentation under Thailand's regularisation and work-permit systems. At the same time, nearly one in four (24%, n=128) were self-reported as undocumented, placing them at heightened risk of arrest, extortion, labour exploitation, and abrupt job loss - factors that were widely reported in the lead-up to the July-August 2025 border tensions. An additional 7% (n=36) were working on short-term border passes, a status that provides only limited mobility and protection. Only a very small number held expired documents (n=2). A handful of workers (fewer than 1%) held other Thai-side administrative documents, such as monthly or weekly certificates, pink cards, or employer-kept passports.



Taken together, these characteristics describe a migrant population with low savings buffers, significant household responsibilities, heavily dependent on wage migration, and suddenly cut off from income when the border crisis unfolded. And while many Cambodian migrants enter or stay in Thailand through official channels, a substantial share remain in irregular or semi-regularised situations.



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Return Pathways and Costs

Return journeys during the conflict were shaped by border restrictions, employer decisions, and the need to move quickly. Workers traveling on border passes are required to exit Thailand through the same checkpoint they entered. This restriction limited flexibility during sudden border closures and contributed to congestion, additional travel costs, and the use of unofficial routes when designated crossings were inaccessible. The vast majority of respondents crossed through the Dong (Cambodian side) / Ban Lem (Thai side) crossing at the Battambang (Cambodia) and Chanthaburi province (Thailand) border checkpoint (75%, n=397).

Most did not return alone: 76% (n=399) came back with family members, most often with 2–3 relatives, highlighting that the disruption was not limited to individual workers but affected whole households.

Return costs were overwhelmingly self-financed: In Thailand, 493 respondents (94%) paid their own transportation. Once in Cambodia, 438 (83%) again paid themselves, while 60 (11%) were supported by the government. Employer-paid or charity-supported returns were rare.

Detailed cost data indicate that returning home was expensive and costs were often unpredictable. On average, respondents spent THB 2,600 on transportation for their entire journey (approximately USD 74, with costs reaching up to THB 50,000 / USD 1,430⁴). They also reported spending at least THB 5,073 on food (around USD 145, up to THB 56,900 / USD 1,630) on their travels. However, the largest costs were attributed to unofficial fees or bribes paid to border agents (on both the Thai and Cambodian side), which was reported at an average of THB 1,946 per respondent (about USD 56, with extreme cases as high as THB 310,000 / USD 8,860), or to unofficial brokers (THB 871 on average per respondent, or approximately USD 25, peaking at THB 156,840 / USD 4,480).

^[4] Respondents provided their answers in Thai Baht. Conversions provided are based on an indicative exchange rate of ~ THB 35 to USD.



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The financing of return journeys relied primarily on personal savings; however, a significant minority were forced to borrow in order to leave Thailand. Forty-four respondents reported taking out loans averaging THB 14,198.74 (around USD 405) to cover return costs, underscoring the financial precarity surrounding the return process. For 8% of respondents, departure from Thailand itself became a direct source of new indebtedness.

Assistance Received During Return

Overall access to assistance was low and uneven. Only 30.5% (n=161) of returned migrant workers received any form of assistance during or after their return from Thailand. A notable 69.5% received no support at all, underscoring a major protection gap during the July-August 2025 border tensions. However, compared to our August Rapid Assessment, where 84% of respondents reported having received no formal assistance, this is an improvement in access.

State-led humanitarian response dominated, but coverage was limited. Among those who did receive help, almost all assistance came from the Cambodian government. The two dominant forms of support provided were:

- Food aid (57%, n=92)
- Transportation assistance (43%, n=70)

The Thai authorities, NGOs, and UN agencies had a limited visible presence in the return process, together representing only a handful of cases involving short-term humanitarian measures rather than long-term reintegration support. This pattern suggests an emergency-style response rather than a coordinated reintegration package.

Beyond immediate return, access to other forms of assistance was extremely limited. Only a small minority of respondents reported receiving



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support that could meaningfully contribute to longer-term recovery. Cash assistance was provided in just 14 cases (9%), while physical health services were accessed by 5 respondents (3%). Mental health support was reported in only 2 cases, and assistance linked to economic reintegration was almost entirely absent, with job opportunity support and vocational training each reported by just one respondent.

A small number of respondents did receive help enrolling in foundational social protection schemes. ID Poor card support was reported by 7% of respondents (n=11), while assistance with National Social Security Fund (NSSF) registration was reported in just 2 instances (1%), highlighting the limited reach of longer-term protection mechanisms.

Finally, assistance from NGOs or UN agencies was not reported in meaningful numbers. NGOs/CSOs appeared in only 4 isolated cases, and UN agencies were not reported as a provider of any form of aid (0%), suggesting either a lack of coordinated presence at border checkpoints, or that support was provided through channels unrecognised or unknown to returnees.

Debt and Financial Stress

Debt emerged as one of the most significant factors shaping returnee vulnerability. 65% of the returnees reported having no savings remaining from working in Thailand. 372 respondents (71%) reported having debt at the time of the survey, with most owing to one (60%) or two (27%) creditors, and 13% owing to three or more institutions.

Debts were spread across multiple sources, including:

- Banks: 90 borrowers
- MFIs: 78 borrowers
- Relatives: 78 borrowers
- Private lenders: 21 borrowers

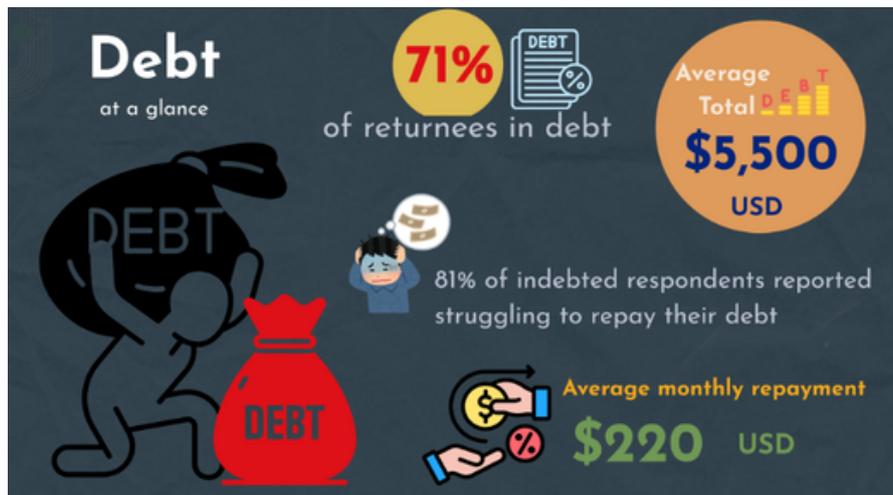


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Additional respondents owed to a combination of these sources, including MFIs + relatives, banks + private lenders, and other blends of more than two creditors.

Reported debt amounts varied sharply - from USD 30.80 to USD 35,000, with an average of USD 5,500. Across the sample, total reported debt (USD 2,035,165.64) exceeded USD 2 million. Monthly repayments averaged USD 220, far above typical rural household surplus income during periods of unemployment, with a maximum repayment value of USD 5,000.

Despite this burden, 386 respondents (73%) reported receiving no assistance after return.



Difficulties in repayment were widespread: 85% (n= 318) of indebted respondents reported being unable to keep up with payments. Yet awareness of debt-relief mechanisms, restructuring, or moratorium options was extremely low, and only a small minority had attempted to negotiate with lenders.

The data illustrate how heavily indebted many migrant households were before the border crisis, and how the sudden return and loss of income compounded their pre-existing economic precarity.



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Skills, Training and Future Plans

Awareness of government training services was limited: only 11% (n=58) had heard of the Ministry of Labour's TVET programmes. However, interest in skill development was substantially higher, with 55% of respondents (n=289) expressing a desire to pursue training.

Training preferences reflected both local labour markets and the sectors where Cambodian workers are commonly employed in Thailand. Of the 289 individuals who expressed interest in training, the popular options were spread fairly evenly across the agriculture, mechanics, construction, garment/tailoring manufacturing, cosmetology, electronics, and culinary sectors.

Despite this demand, 238 respondents (45%) stated they were not interested in any training, which may reflect immediate economic pressures, lack of local opportunities, or low confidence in the usefulness of training programmes.

Looking ahead, a significant proportion planned to leave again: 53% of respondents (n=279) intended to remigrate. Of these, the vast majority (78%, n=218) aimed to return to Thailand, while smaller groups expressed interest in South Korea (13%) or Japan (5%). This is a stark difference from our August Rapid Assessment sample, of which only 13% reported a firm intention to migrate. These figures suggest persistent drivers of migration, including debt, the need to find work quickly, low wages in Cambodia, and the absence of viable local employment pathways.



QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

FGD participants spoke openly about the hardships they faced both abroad and upon return, and the difficult choices they now confront in rebuilding their lives. Many had worked for years in Thailand yet returned home with little to show for it. As one worker shared:

“We came home with nothing. All our money went to paying debts and supporting our families.”

Even among documented workers, wages were routinely eroded by living costs, remittances and recurring deductions. Conditions were markedly worse for irregular workers. One participant noted:

“For illegal workers, the employer cut our wages for passport fees, visa fees, health card fees... they took 12,000 baht from me every six months.”

Costs, risks and abuses during the return journey

Participants described the severe financial and physical risks involved in returning during the border tensions. During the period of migrants returning home, there were some common issues found at the borders. There was not enough assistance for the returnees, who were provided with food and water only. There were bus services provided for them, and buses were stationed at the border to assist migrant workers. However, the bus services were limited to those who lived in provincial cities only, and most returnees chose to travel by taxi instead.

Based on the FGDs conducted in Siem Reap, returnees stated that they chose private taxis because the city buses refused to drive them to Varin district and only accepted those who lived in the city.



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In addition, participants spoke of being charged multiple fees at the border, including:

1. Ticket fee: THB 100
2. Shelter fee (ថ្លៃជ្រកម្លប់): THB 1,000 to wait under a marquee
3. Baggage fee: THB 100–1,000 per sack
4. Unknown fees: THB 600–1,000, despite the fact that no re-entry stamps were placed in their passports
5. Another unknown fee: THB 500. Many returnees reported paying this fee without knowing its purpose. They were called into a building where their ticket was stamped or processed, after which they waited for the border to open without having their re-entry stamped.

Irregular migrants recounted far harsher journeys involving physical danger and extortion. One returnee described being smuggled into Thailand in conditions that were extremely unsafe:

“We had to pay 3,500 baht to the broker. They put at least 60 people in a truck. We left at 7PM and arrived at 7AM. The inside was inhumane – we were squeezed together and told to stay silent or be caught by authorities. Sometimes they built extra wooden floors so more people could lie down. When we reached the rubber plantation, the brokers in Thailand met us with guns and blades. If anyone made noise, they threatened us at gunpoint.”

Others recalled fleeing in several directions when authorities appeared, being detained in overcrowded cells with 300–500 people, and having to share limited toilets. One returnee said that, after being handed over to Cambodian authorities, *“they asked us to pay 200 baht for the release.”*

Participants also described irregular “fee collections” on both sides of the border, noting that when media teams were present on the Cambodian side, local authorities would temporarily stop collecting money, while Thai authorities would collect double and split the proceeds later.



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During the conflict period, costs rose further. The journey home often required up to THB 5,000, including approximately THB 3,000 for transport from worksites to the border and another THB 2,000 to reach home. At Poipet and other checkpoints, scenes were described as chaotic due to the sheer volume of returnees. Authorities reportedly opened the gate in intervals, allowing 100–200 people to cross at a time until no one remained.

In some locations, limited emergency assistance was provided. In Preah Vihear province, for instance, the commune office distributed emergency packages to returnees, including fish sauce, soy sauce, rice, canned fish, and instant noodles.

Limited assistance despite severe need

These accounts help contextualise the survey finding that 69% of returnees received no assistance. Apart from occasional food or water at border points, participants described little meaningful support. Multiple returnees said that the free buses provided at some entry points only transported people living in provincial towns, excluding most rural workers. As one returnee put it: *“There was no help. Only food and water. Even the buses only took people who lived in town.”*

A commune chief in one area invited returnees to register for job opportunities, but the participant described unclear follow-up: people registered, but no one knew whether anyone was ever selected.

Debt: the central driver and consequence of migration

Survey data shows 71% of returnees are currently in debt, and the FGD testimonies illustrate the lived reality behind this figure:

- Land titles pawned to MFIs or private lenders



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- Children withdrawn from school
- Households surviving on very low daily budgets (e.g., KHR 5,000 / ~ USD 1.25) for a family of four in Preah Vihear)
- Fear of lenders and intense psychological strain

Participants also reported the severe social toll of debt: *“Four people killed themselves due to debt. One more was rescued in time.”*

FGD accounts highlighted several key ways in which debt is affecting families and communities:

1. Children’s education is disrupted because parents can no longer afford school costs.
2. Debt pushes people to migrate repeatedly, both legally and irregularly, because local earnings cannot cover repayments.
3. Family separation is increasingly common, as members migrate to meet repayment deadlines.
4. Farmers lose access to their land after pawning titles, leaving them unable to farm.
5. Mental health is deteriorating, with many borrowers owing to multiple institutions simultaneously and struggling to meet basic needs.

Few viable livelihood options in Cambodia

The FGDs strongly reinforced the survey’s findings on limited local employment opportunities. Participants described attempts to find work in Phnom Penh, Poipet, Bavet, Sihanoukville and plantation areas - often using their last remaining savings - only to encounter exploitative or unsafe conditions. One returnee described working on a banana plantation: *“I worked clearing seven rows of trees per day. After three and a half days, they didn’t pay me anything.”* Another described clearing 300 metres of grass per day with no access to clean drinking water; a woman working alongside her became ill



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after drinking directly from an irrigation pipe. Factory work was also described as harsh and degrading: *“Factory managers insult workers in front of everyone, calling us stupid.”*

These experiences help shed light on the remigration intentions of more than half of the survey respondents. For many, local work does not provide a viable path to recovery or repayment, leaving remigration, even through dangerous or irregular channels, as the only perceived option.

Returned Migrant Worker Profile 1

Male, Banteay Meanchey Province

The worker had been working in Thailand for five years. He explained that before the conflict, there was no racial discrimination in the village where he lived. However, immediately after the conflict, the situation changed. He reported that food vendors in the village began to behave differently and were unwilling to sell food to him. Some vendors made remarks such as: *“Prime Minister, you are so strong, why don’t you go back to your country?”*

Following the conflict, he was fired from his job and reported that he did not receive his salary. He has two sons who continue to work in Thailand and who together owe a total of 20,000 baht. He also noted that after the conflict, many Cambodian migrant workers were replaced by migrant workers from Myanmar and Laos.



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Returned Migrant Worker Profile 2

Female, Pursat Province

The worker is a widow with four children. While working in Thailand, she regularly sent money to her children to support them. When the conflict broke out in August, she reported feeling very scared and decided to return to Cambodia.

At the time of return, she had no money for travel. Her children sent her 5,000 baht so that she could return. She reported that she did not have sufficient documents, and her visa had expired. She returned through the Samlot border, described as a shortcut or unofficial gate, and paid 2,000 baht to cross without stamping her passport. After returning to Cambodia, she reported that she did not receive any services from the state.

December 2025 situation update

Follow-up interviews conducted in late December 2025 indicate increased fear, instability, and constraints on daily life following renewed hostilities. Respondents described heightened anxiety and worry, disruptions to children's schooling, and uncertainty about where to find work. Many reported being afraid "all the time," avoiding travel and trading activities due to security concerns.

Livelihood conditions have deteriorated. Returnees reported very limited income, with some earning only around 30% of what they previously earned in Thailand. Job losses and business closures were reported, including employers leaving conflict-affected areas. Some respondents described



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being unable to find any work locally, while others reported losing factory or informal employment due to illness or inability to continue working.

Food insecurity has worsened. Some households reported relying on fishing or scavenging to feed themselves, which were irregular and insufficient as coping strategies. A female returnee from Banteay Meanchey stated, *“We have nothing to eat, just rice with fish sauce or some fish we caught. There is no work. No one is helping us.”* Rising food prices and the absence of assistance were reported, alongside additional expenses for medicine when children became sick.

Debt pressure has intensified. Respondents described falling behind on repayments and being unable to repay loans. Requests for debt relief were often unsuccessful, with banks reportedly stating that loan suspension was not authorized. As a result, some households borrowed regularly from relatives or private money lenders to meet repayments. Loan extensions were described as unhelpful in the absence of stable work. In one reported case, a credit officer refused to support a suspension request and pressured the borrower to take a private loan to repay the bank, refusing to leave their home until they gave the money over.

Cross-border movement remains mixed but constrained. In some communities, outward migration to Thailand has largely stopped, with people reporting fear of arrest, deportation, or attack, and describing villages as “quiet.” Concerns were also raised about becoming undocumented if visas are not extended while borders remain closed. At the same time, some people were reported to be returning to Thailand by plane through agencies at high cost, often to resume previous construction jobs. Others were reported to be preparing to migrate to Malaysia, either through company-arranged travel or informal channels, in order to repay debt.



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Gendered impacts. Women were described as carrying greater responsibility for managing household finances and being the ones who engage with lenders, increasing stress and emotional burden. Some men were described as avoiding engagement with debt issues due to shame, or coping through drinking, sleep and withdrawal. Insomnia linked to debt-related stress was also reported by female respondents – *“I cannot sleep at night because I worry and try to figure out how to repay my debts,”* a returnee from Siem Reap shared. Increased domestic tension, violence⁵ and community-level insecurity were noted, including reports of rising thefts such as motorcycles, dogs and cats in some areas.

Employment options within Cambodia were widely described as unstable and unreliable. Respondents reported traveling to Phnom Penh for work only to face high living costs, poor accommodation, unstable employment, or non-payment of wages. Age limits, verbal harassment in factories, and unsafe plantation work were also reported. Misleading job announcements were described, including cases where workers travelled long distances for advertised jobs only to find that the contact was unreachable or the work did not exist, reinforcing mistrust of recruitment channels.

Overall, the December 2025 update reflects a worsening situation characterized by declining livelihoods, increasing food insecurity and debt distress, heightened fear, and limited safe coping options for affected households.

^[5] Anecdotal information from respondents indicated cases of severe debt-related domestic violence, including at least one reported murder–suicide incident. While these cases were not independently verified as part of this study, they illustrate the acute psychological and social pressures associated with extreme indebtedness.



RECOMMENDATIONS

This study reinforces and deepens findings from earlier rapid assessments, confirming that returned migrant workers face intersecting pressures of income loss, food insecurity, and high debt, alongside limited access to services and viable employment. Addressing these risks requires a coordinated, time-bound response that stabilises households in the short term while reducing drivers of unsafe remigration. Based on the evidence, the following five priority actions are recommended.

Recommendation 1: Rapidly expand time-bound social protection for returnee households

Extra social protection should be immediately scaled up, rather than phased out, for households with returning migrant members. These measures should include temporary cash assistance, food support, and fee waivers for essential health services. Support should prioritise border and high-return provinces and households facing high dependency ratios, female-headed households, and severe debt distress.

Enrolment should be simplified through commune offices and mobile registration, with assistance front-loaded during the first 8–12 weeks following return and tapered as employment stabilises. These measures are critical to preventing harmful coping strategies, school dropouts, and forced remigration.

Recommendation 2: Accelerate employment recovery through public-private hiring incentives

To address widespread unemployment and underemployment, the



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government should promote rapid job creation by incentivising private sector hiring of returnees in labour-absorbing sectors such as construction, agriculture, and public works. Time-bound wage subsidies, tax incentives, or quota-based hiring mechanisms can support uptake, while public contracts can include returnee employment requirements.

Employment initiatives should continue to prioritise safe worksites, transparent wage payments, and access for women and older workers, with targeting linked to commune-verified returnee registries; in line with work already completed or currently underway.⁶

Recommendation 3: Fast-track skills recognition, short-term upskilling, and temporary health coverage

Many returnees possess valuable work experience but lack formal certification. Recognition of skills learned on the job and/or abroad should be expanded to rapidly certify existing skills through mobile assessors and fee waivers in high-return provinces.

For those without immediately marketable skills, short-cycle vocational training aligned with short-term labour demand should be supported through tuition vouchers and small stipends. While the government has rolled out significant programs through TVET to address this, more effort could be made to ensure the public is aware of the opportunities. To reduce financial pressure and encourage formal registration, temporary, tax-financed NSSF health coverage should be extended to registered returnees for a limited period, with a clear transition to contributory status.

Recommendation 4: Implement a temporary debt moratorium and targeted debt-relief measures

Given the scale of household indebtedness documented in this study, the National Bank of Cambodia should coordinate with banks and MFIs to

^[6] The response from the Cambodian government and the ILO has been heavily focused on this component, which should not be discounted. <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/ilo-delivers-critical-support-returning-cambodian-migrant-workers>



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expand temporary repayment moratoria, loan restructuring, or low interest refinancing for verified returnee households.

Relief should prioritise households experiencing repayment distress, multiple lenders, or risk of land loss. Targeted debt measures would help stabilise household finances, reduce pressure to remigrate under unsafe conditions, and mitigate broader financial-system risks.

Recommendation 5: Streamline documentation and strengthen safe-migration pathways

To deter irregular and unsafe remigration, the government should expand one-stop documentation services in border and high-return provinces, including passport issuance, ID renewal, and residence certification, with fee reductions or waivers for returnees. Temporary amnesties for expired documents and mobile service delivery would further reduce barriers.

In parallel, safe-migration pathways should be strengthened through capped or zero-fee recruitment, transparent registries of licensed recruiters, enforceable contracts, and accessible complaints mechanisms, supported by targeted anti-trafficking outreach in high-risk communities.



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Policy Alignment

These recommendations align with prior national assessments and international human rights guidance, including Human Rights Watch's November 2025 findings on returned Cambodian migrant workers, particularly on debt relief, protection from predatory lending, and expanded access to health and social services. Acting on this evidence will help stabilise households, reduce exploitation risks, and strengthen migration governance during periods of cross-border disruption. Existing support to returning migrant workers in Cambodia has already demonstrated the relevance of reintegration counselling, job-matching assistance, skills referrals, and psychosocial services, but this assessment suggests that such support has not yet reached returnees at the scale required.





CONCLUSION

The large-scale return of Cambodian migrant workers from Thailand during the 2025 border tensions represents one of the most abrupt migration reversals since the COVID-19 pandemic. This study confirms that return was not a managed reintegration process but a crisis-driven disruption that left many households without income, food security, or access to meaningful support. For most returnees, the loss of employment coincided with high levels of pre-existing debt, creating immediate financial stress and sharply limiting recovery options.

Findings from this assessment reinforce earlier rapid research while providing deeper insight into how these pressures have evolved over time. Despite some improvement in access to assistance since the peak of returns in mid-2025, support has remained uneven and largely limited to short-term relief. Livelihood opportunities within Cambodia remain scarce and unstable, particularly for older workers, women with caregiving responsibilities, and those with limited formal education. As a result, many households face continued uncertainty, and intentions to remigrate, often under unsafe or irregular conditions, have increased rather than diminished.

Debt has emerged as the central constraint shaping household decisions, affecting food consumption, access to education, and mental well-being, while also driving renewed migration pressure. Without targeted debt relief, employment recovery, and social protection, returnee households are likely to remain trapped in cycles of vulnerability that undermine both individual welfare and broader social stability.

The evidence presented in this report underscores the need for a coordinated, time-bound policy response that moves beyond emergency



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assistance toward stabilisation and recovery. Expanding social protection, accelerating job creation, easing debt burdens, and strengthening safe-migration pathways are not only measures to support returned migrant workers, but investments in resilience, labour-market stability, and effective migration governance. Acting on these findings now can help prevent a resurgence of unsafe migration, exploitation, and long-term social harm, while ensuring that the rights and dignity of returned workers are protected during periods of cross-border disruption.

According to the Ministry of Interior, as of late February 2026, more than 65,000 people remained in internally displaced persons camps due to the border conflict. In addition, dozens of schools and hospitals remain closed, nearly 1,000 personal homes were permanently destroyed, and tens of thousands of people do not yet have clearance to return to their homes. The humanitarian stress on the Cambodians impacted by this conflict remains dire, even months following the successful ceasefire. Government and non-government responses need to remain focused on those most vulnerable, which includes many of the individuals included within this assessment.

For more information on this assessment and the rest of CENTRAL's work to respond to this crisis, please visit us at <https://central-cambodia.org/>.