

Rapid Needs Assessment

Return Migrants Affected by the Cambodia–Thailand Border Crisis

30 September 2025

Background and Rationale

In late July 2025, escalating tensions along the Cambodia–Thailand border triggered mass returns of Cambodian migrant workers. Unverified government estimates suggest over 900,000 people returned from Thailand in a matter of weeks¹; a scale not seen since the COVID-19 border closures. Unlike COVID-19, this return is occurring in the context of heightened fear: migrants report being targeted for harassment, facing unpredictable border openings and subsequent concerns regarding their return to work, and hearing alarming rumors of violence against Cambodian workers in Thailand.

CENTRAL launched this Rapid Needs Assessment to understand the immediate humanitarian needs, economic vulnerabilities, and migration intentions of returning workers and displaced families. The data has thus far guided our own response planning, inform advocacy with government and donors, and could help shape coordinated interventions to prevent secondary crises such as debt distress, unemployment, and human trafficking. CENTRAL hopes to make this data available to other stakeholders with similar needs.

Methodology

Between July 28 and August 7, CENTRAL’s network of trained Safe Migration Ambassadors (SMAs) – community-based volunteers with experience supporting migrant workers – conducted the first survey round in six provinces: Banteay Meanchey, Pailin,

¹ <https://kiripost.com/stories/cambodian-migrant-workers-flee-thailand-amid-rising-discrimination-and-violence>

Oddar Meanchey, Siem Reap, Battambang, and Kampong Thom. This initial round captured most responses. A second round of 228 interviews was carried out between August 9 and August 15, which included 12 follow-up interviews with individuals already surveyed during the first round, as well as new respondents across Banteay Meanchey, Battambang, Kampong Thom, Preah Vihear, and Siem Reap. Finally, a separate exercise was undertaken in Koh Kong province between August 30 and September 1, where 44 interviews were conducted by CENTRAL's Migration Team to capture dynamics specific to that border area.

Our team selected respondents directly within migrant communities, focusing on those who returned from Thailand after July 25. Interviews were conducted in Khmer, using a structured questionnaire capturing demographics, reasons for return, urgent needs, household composition, and future migration plans.

Alongside the household survey, qualitative interviews and site visits were conducted by CENTRAL's Migration Team at the Doung Checkpoint (August 2 – 3) in Banteay Meanchey, as well as in Siem Reap, Kampong Thom, and Oddar Meanchey throughout data collection. Speaking with provincial level authorities, the International Labor Organization's Migrant Resource Centres, the Cambodian government's National Employment Agency, CENTRAL's existing labor networks within relevant Special Economic Zones, and other community members, our team captured shifting trends and patterns across the communities included within the interviews. Supplementary information came from local-authority briefings and direct observation at major border-crossing points and temporary displaced-person camps. These testimonies complement the quantitative findings and highlight shared patterns across provinces.

A total of 815 interviews were conducted, including 12 follow-up interviews with participants previously surveyed in the first round, representing 803 unique individuals interviewed across eight provinces: Banteay Meanchey, Pailin, Oddar Meanchey, Siem Reap, Battambang, Preah Vihear, Koh Kong and Kampong Thom. The largest share of responses came from Banteay Meanchey (251 interviews across both rounds), where

CENTRAL’s SMA network is strongest and has long-standing access to returned-migrant communities. Other substantial samples were collected in Kampong Thom (221), Battambang (82), Preah Vihear (95), Oddar Meanchey (69), Siem Reap (47), Koh Kong (44), and Pailin (6). Due to the much lower numbers of interviews conducted in Pailin, this assessment did not conduct provincial-level analysis between this province and others.

Demographics

A total of 815 interviews were conducted nationwide, representing approximately 803 individual respondents. Of these, 12 respondents were interviewed twice as part of follow-up visits. Demographic data were available for 798 unique individuals. This slight gap is due to a small number of respondents who did not provide complete demographic details; most commonly missing age or household-size information, and a few records with incomplete names that could not be matched across files.

Women comprised a slight majority across all provinces, with 406 female respondents compared to 391 male respondents, and one respondent identifying as LGBTIQ. The vast majority, 659 individuals (83%), reported being married, while 102 were single and 37 widowed (men and women). Across gender, respondents were mostly of working age. Forty respondents (5%) were aged 15–25, 102 (13%) were 26–35, 76 (10%) were 36–45, and 37 (5%) were 46–65; just four respondents were aged 66 or older.

Household size was typically moderate: most respondents reported between 3–5 household members affected by the crisis — with 146 households of 3 members, 210 households of 4, and 127 households of 5. Another 94 households reported 1–2 affected members, 79 households had 6 members, 90 households had between 7–10 members, and 5 households reported 11–20 members.

Provincial Demographic Patterns

Across all eight provinces, the respondent pool reflects Cambodia's returning labor force: mostly married, working-age adults supporting mid-sized households. Still, several provincial contrasts emerged from the survey.

Women formed a slight majority overall, but the gender balance shifted by province. Border provinces with a long history of cross-border construction and plantation work – Banteay Meanchey, Battambang, and Oddar Meanchey – had a somewhat higher share of male respondents, reflecting the prevalence of men in those sectors. In contrast, Kampong Thom and Preah Vihear reported more women respondents, many of whom had worked in factories or domestic service in Thailand. Koh Kong's smaller sample skewed female as well, consistent with local reports that many returning women had worked in the seafood-processing and caregiving sectors across the border.

Age profiles also differed. Kampong Thom's sample skewed younger, with a significant share of respondents aged 15–25, suggesting a higher proportion of youth engaged in seasonal or informal labor migration. Banteay Meanchey and Oddar Meanchey had more respondents in the 26–35 age bracket, typical of prime-age workers who had returned with families. Preah Vihear and Pailin had relatively older respondents (36–45 and above), often long-term migrants returning after years in agricultural or plantation jobs. Koh Kong's 44 respondents were mostly in the 26–35 age group, with few younger migrants captured in the survey.

Marriage rates were high in every province, but Kampong Thom and Banteay Meanchey had noticeably more single, younger migrants, consistent with their age profile. Preah Vihear and Pailin recorded the highest proportion of widowed respondents, reflecting an older returnee population.

Most households nationwide reported 3–5 affected members, but the distribution varied slightly. Banteay Meanchey and Oddar Meanchey showed larger households, often 5–6 members or more, which may heighten food-security pressure. Kampong Thom and Koh Kong tended toward partly linked to their younger respondents. A few very large

households (7–10 members) were scattered across Banteay Meanchey, Preah Vihear, and Kampong Thom.

Key Findings

Urgent Needs and Financial Pressures

The survey confirms a strong convergence of needs around food security and income generation. Although respondents were able to select multiple urgent needs, Table 4 (Annex) reflects only the first need each respondent identified. This provides an indication of the most immediate concerns at the time of each interview, though it does not capture the full overlap of needs.

Out of 815 interviews, food assistance was reported as the first priority by 653 respondents ($\approx 80\%$), followed by employment by 96 respondents ($\approx 12\%$), cash assistance by 32 respondents ($\approx 4\%$), shelter or transportation by 25 respondents ($\approx 3\%$), and medical care by 6 respondents ($\approx 1\%$).

These results underline that food security dominated household concerns at the peak of the return crisis, with employment emerging as the second-most pressing need. While food was the top immediate concern, most households also highlighted the need for cash and stable work to sustain themselves in the longer term.

These patterns mirror the COVID-19 returnee crisis, when large numbers of workers returned burdened by debt, without jobs, and reliant on unstable daily-wage income. The scale is now broader, affecting both long-established migration corridors (Banteay Meanchey, Oddar Meanchey, Battambang) and provinces further inland (Kampong Thom, Preah Vihear, Siem Reap, Koh Kong). Without timely intervention, the return influx risks triggering widespread economic distress across entire households and communities.

Unsurprisingly, respondents across all included provinces described the same underlying pressures that drove their return to Cambodia. Many cited fears of arrest by Thai authorities, pressure from family members to return home, the ongoing border conflict, and ethnic discrimination in Thailand. For some, the decision was not voluntary but shaped by escalating risks, unpaid wages, and uncertainty in Thailand.

The financial burden of returning was significant everywhere. Multiple workers reported spending between 500 and 5,000 Thai Baht (approximately 15–155 USD) to cross back via the Doung International Border in Battambang Province, often borrowing from relatives to cover the cost. Additional expenses, including approximately 600 Baht for onward travel to home provinces and 300–600 Baht to transport belongings, deepened household debt. As one worker explained, “I returned from Thailand to Cambodia late because I was waiting for my employer to pay me,” underscoring the financial precarity even at the point of departure.

Migration Intentions and Influencing Factors

The majority of respondents indicated that they intend to remain in Cambodia if stable work is available. As shown in Table 5 (Annex), 57 % of respondents said they planned to stay in Cambodia, while 30 % were undecided and said their choice would depend on receiving short-term support such as food or cash aid. Only 13 % expressed a clear intention to return to Thailand.

This pattern suggests that most returnees would prefer not to migrate again if they could secure decent employment at home. However, a significant minority remain undecided or likely to remigrate, underscoring that households facing immediate food or cash shortages are at highest risk of re-migration. Timely livelihood support and cash transfers could therefore play a pivotal role in stabilising these families and reducing pressure for unsafe migration.

In contrast to reports from returnees during the COVID-19 crisis, most returnees indicated that they do not wish to return to Thailand if they can secure stable, decently paid work in Cambodia. Their requests are consistent across provinces: jobs with fair wages, long-term livelihood support, and opportunities to repay debts without having to migrate again. One returnee stated: “I don’t want daily food aid or supplies. What I need most right now is a job in the country.”

When asked about future plans, the combined responses from all provinces show that a majority plan to stay in Cambodia *if* stable work becomes available, with a smaller but significant minority expressing uncertainty or a desire to return to Thailand. This uncertainty is most pronounced among households whose immediate needs center on food and cash assistance, suggesting that their migration decisions remain contingent on short-term economic relief. In contrast, those prioritising both food and employment were more inclined to remain in Cambodia if they could access stable work opportunities.

These findings reinforce that employment and income generation are as critical as food assistance. Without targeted livelihood programs to absorb returnees into local economies, the combination of debt, unemployment, and border uncertainty risks pushing many into irregular or unsafe migration channels. Despite official border closures, it is likely that many migrants may feel compelled to travel to Thailand again soon should they fail to secure work in Cambodia.

Protection Risks and Support Gaps

Even among those determined to stay in Cambodia, the absence of safe, sustainable employment raises significant protection concerns. Households without viable livelihoods are vulnerable to re-migration through unsafe channels or exploitative work, including recruitment into scam compounds in Cambodia.

Compounding this vulnerability is the fact that most respondents ($\approx 682 / 84\%$) reported receiving no formal assistance to date. This gap underscores the urgency of providing both

immediate humanitarian relief and longer-term livelihood programming to stabilise households and reduce the drivers of risky migration. With Thailand's land borders largely closed, opportunities for safe and legal migration remain severely limited, heightening the risk of exploitation for those who feel compelled to return abroad.

Province-Specific Findings and Patterns

While the overall picture across provinces is similar – urgent needs dominated by food insecurity, unemployment or underemployment, and a need for cash support – the survey revealed several geographic nuances that point to different kinds of vulnerabilities.

In Banteay Meanchey, which accounted for the largest share of responses, the pattern of combined food and employment needs was strongest, reflecting the province's role as a major cross-border migration hub. Many returnees here reported being the main earners for larger households of five to six members, intensifying food-security and debt pressures.

Kampong Thom stood out for its younger respondent profile. A significant share of those surveyed were aged 15–25 and often single or without children. Their priority was overwhelmingly reported as immediate employment rather than food aid, suggesting that youth-focused job creation could help stabilise this group and reduce future out-migration.

Preah Vihear's respondents were generally older and more likely to be widowed or from multi-generation households. Food insecurity was the leading concern here, and household sizes tended to be larger than in most other provinces, magnifying the strain on limited resources.

Oddar Meanchey and Battambang reflected a mix of agricultural day-labourers and construction workers. Both provinces showed high levels of debt from costs of returning home, and a strong demand for both food support and jobs. Respondents from these areas often reported spending more on transport and luggage fees due to longer journeys from worksites in Thailand.

Siem Reap, though a smaller sample, revealed similar patterns but with a slightly higher proportion of women who had previously worked in domestic service and informal sectors in Thailand. Their main concerns mirrored national trends: food, cash, and local jobs.

Koh Kong, surveyed separately, displayed needs similar to the border provinces but with a notable proportion of women previously employed in seafood-processing and caregiving sectors. Many emphasised the need for stable local jobs to prevent further migration, suggesting a heightened vulnerability to exploitation may be present within these sectors in Thailand.

Pailin had the smallest sample, limiting robust analysis, but responses echoed the neighbouring border provinces with urgent needs around food and income recovery.

These differences suggest that while emergency food support is a universal priority, effective livelihood and recovery programming will need to account for provincial variations. This was especially true for the groups of young returnees in Kampong Thom, the larger households in Preah Vihear and Banteay Meanchey, and the gendered nature of return in Koh Kong and Siem Reap.

These provincial contrasts underline the importance of tailoring interventions rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach. In provinces such as Kampong Thom, where many returnees are young and unmarried, targeted youth employment schemes, vocational training, and entry-level job placements could help stabilise livelihoods and reduce future migration pressure. In Preah Vihear and Banteay Meanchey, where households are typically larger and often headed by married or widowed adults, food-assistance packages and debt-relief measures should be prioritised to protect family welfare. Border provinces like Banteay Meanchey, Battambang, and Oddar Meanchey also require early investment in cross-border livelihood recovery and safe-migration information to prevent a resurgence of risky migration once the borders reopen. Meanwhile, the gendered return patterns seen in Koh Kong and Siem Reap suggest a need for local job opportunities that are accessible

and safe for women, especially those with caregiving responsibilities. These differentiated strategies would allow humanitarian and development actors to address the most pressing needs of each province while reducing long-term drivers of unsafe migration.

Emerging Implications

This assessment highlights the need for a dual-track response that addresses both immediate survival needs and longer-term economic stability for returned migrant households. The most urgent priority remains scaling up emergency food assistance to ensure that households in all affected provinces have reliable access to sufficient and nutritious food. However, food aid alone will not prevent a resurgence of unsafe migration or economic collapse at the household level. Equally important is the need to invest in job creation and income recovery initiatives that can provide sustainable livelihoods within Cambodia.

Patterns in migration intentions across the assessment show that the households most undecided about returning to Thailand are likely to be whose needs focus on food and cash assistance. Targeting these households with timely cash transfers could ease the immediate financial pressures that drive re-migration, particularly while legal migration channels remain limited and border restrictions persist.

A further area of focus is youth employment. Younger returnees, especially those aged 15–25, were more common in provinces such as Kampong Thom and showed a higher openness to migrating again. Without viable opportunities at home, these younger workers may soon re-enter risky migration flows. Expanding safe and legal youth employment pathways within Cambodia – such as vocational training, apprenticeships, and public works programs – will be crucial to keeping this group engaged in the domestic labour market.

The findings also underline the need to tailor interventions to provincial contexts. Larger households in provinces like Banteay Meanchey and Preah Vihear may require more

substantial food and debt-relief support, while the gendered return patterns in Koh Kong and Siem Reap highlight the importance of creating local job opportunities that are safe and accessible for women. Such targeted programming would better address both immediate welfare needs and longer-term resilience.

Finally, the data underscore the need to strengthen anti-trafficking measures. The combination of debt, unemployment, border restrictions, and lack of social safety nets creates a high-risk environment in which traffickers can exploit desperation, including recruitment into scam compounds and other forms of forced labour. Without robust prevention and protection strategies, the economic hardship documented in this assessment could quickly translate into a surge in exploitative migration.

Conclusion

This assessment provides one of the first comprehensive snapshots of the humanitarian and economic pressures facing Cambodian migrant workers who returned home during the border crisis in July and August 2025. Drawing on 815 interviews across eight provinces, the findings paint a consistent picture: most returnees are working-age adults supporting mid-sized households, with urgent and overlapping needs for food, income generation, and debt relief.

The assessment highlights both common national patterns and critical provincial nuances. While food insecurity and joblessness are universal concerns, the specific vulnerabilities differ: there is a large percentage of youth unemployment and high remigration risk in Kampong Thom; larger households and debt burdens in Banteay Meanchey and Preah Vihear; and gendered return patterns in Koh Kong and Siem Reap. These differences underline the need for tailored responses that combine immediate survival support with long-term economic recovery.

Despite the large-scale return, most respondents expressed a desire to remain in Cambodia if they can access stable work and fair wages. This signals that well-designed livelihood

interventions and targeted cash support could significantly reduce pressure for risky migration. However, the absence of meaningful assistance so far and the ongoing lack of legal migration pathways could escalate into heightened trafficking risks and unsafe migration flows if action is not taken quickly.

These findings underscore the urgency of a coordinated, multi-pronged response by government, humanitarian actors, and donors. As additional data from ongoing assessments and future monitoring become available, CENTRAL urges stakeholders to continue to share information and coordinate efforts to address returned migrants' needs. CENTRAL also remains committed to using the insights from this assessment and any further monitoring to advocate for immediate relief, sustainable livelihood programming, and strengthened protection mechanisms to support returned migrants and their families during this critical period.

Annex: Quantitative Data Summary

The following tables present a concise summary of key quantitative findings from the Rapid Needs Assessment of Returned Migrant Workers conducted by CENTRAL between late July and September 2025.

Data reflect 815 interviews with 803 unique respondents across eight provinces: Banteay Meanchey, Kampong Thom, Preah Vihear, Battambang, Oddar Meanchey, Siem Reap, Koh Kong, and Pailin.

The tables highlight respondents' demographics, household composition, urgent needs, migration intentions, and geographic distribution. These figures provide the quantitative foundation for the narrative analysis in the main report and are included here for transparency and future reference.

Table 1. Gender of Respondents (n = 803 individuals)

Gender	Number of respondents
Women	406
Men	391
LGBTIQ	1

Table 2. Age Distribution of Respondents (n ≈ 798 with age data)

Age group (years)	Number of respondents
15–25	40
26–35	102
36–45	76
46–65	37
66+	4

Table 3. Household Size of Respondents (n ≈ 798 with household data)

Household members affected	Number of households
1–2 members	94
3 members	146

Household members affected	Number of households
4 members	210
5 members	127
6 members	79
7–10 members	90
11–20 members	5

Table 4. Urgent Needs Reported (Primary Need Reported) (n = 815 interviews)

Urgent-need category	Number of respondents
Food	653
Employment	96
Cash Assistance	32
Medical Care	6
Shelter/Transportation	25

Table 5. Migration Intentions (percent of respondents)

Intention	Share of respondents
Stay in Cambodia	57 %
Undecided / depends on aid	30 %
Plan to return to Thailand	13 %

Table 6. Respondents by Province (n = 815 interviews)

Province	Number of interviews
Banteay Meanchey	251
Kampong Thom	221
Preah Vihear	95
Battambang	82
Oddar Meanchey	69
Siem Reap	47
Koh Kong	44
Pailin	6