**Inputs on the Impact of the COVID-19 on the Rights of Migrants**

Submitted to: The Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants

Submitted by: Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights (an organization in special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council).

Submitted on: **Impact of the COVID-19 on Migrant Rights in Turkey**

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**An introduction**

The outbreak of the Covid-19 in Turkey has exacerbated the suffering of migrants and their families. They faced many difficulties to obtain the services necessary to complete life, proper medical care, and clean water, especially in an illegal situation. Moreover, undocumented immigrants were not included in social protection programs against the Coronavirus, and they did not have access to medical services except in emergencies. Many of them also faced hate speech and discrimination associated with the Coronavirus spread in the absence of just legal remedies for the victims of these speeches, allowing a culture of impunity to increase. On the other hand, many illegal immigrants were excluded from financial protection programs for health and social services, which led to an increased risk of an epidemic among them. Regular legal immigrants faced challenges in accessing health care services such as language barriers, a lack of access to adequate information, and working in hazardous conditions that represent a suitable environment for the spread of the Coronavirus among them.

Local and international NGOs that provide services to migrants and their families are experiencing difficulties accessing and providing services; due to the strict measures taken by the Turkish government to counter the spread of the Coronavirus. It does not take into account the civil society organizations that contribute to alleviating the effects on migrants and their families. Turkey contains about one million immigrants with residence permits for study, work, and tourism, in addition to 62,000 illegal immigrants who are exposed to the effects of the Coronavirus due to the increase in unemployment and poverty rates. In addition to the inability of illegal immigrants to access health and social services[[1]](#footnote-1).

**Lack of access to medical and social services for immigrants in Turkey**

The Coronavirus has threatened the lives of about one million immigrants, in addition to 62,000 illegal immigrants in Turkey. Many of them faced poverty due to the loss of their social jobs. Turkish government set up a lack of social support programs to overcome the Coronavirus compared to Turkish citizens who received more privileges. Most of them face difficulties in accessing health care and social services such as clean water and a healthy environment and reliable information on how to combat the disease. Other factors contributed to the increase in the lack of access to services to migrants, including cultural factors related to language, communication, and lack of knowledge. Illegal immigrants can only access public health services in government-affiliated public hospitals in an emergency, with security concerns about being reported and deported. Thus, illegal immigrants prefer to resort to private hospitals, whose cost is four times higher than public hospitals[[2]](#footnote-2).

**On the social level**, many immigrants lost their jobs due to companies close during the Coronavirus spread. It contributed to the increase in unemployment and poverty rates among the Turkish immigrant community. And the lack of social protection programs directed against immigrants compared to the rest of the population in Turkey[[3]](#footnote-3). The problems of access to clean water, healthy food, and adequate housing have also worsened. Many have been forced to live in overcrowded homes where social distancing is difficult[[4]](#footnote-4). For example, many Palestinian immigrants in Turkey suffer from difficult social conditions due to increased unemployment and a lack of healthy food. They live in overcrowded housing units, which leads to an increase in infection with the Coronavirus[[5]](#footnote-5)،. Armenian migrant workers in Istanbul face limited access to various social services, health care, and providing food and housing[[6]](#footnote-6).

Migrant seasonal agricultural workers in Turkey face risks related to providing safety measures in their places of residence as they lack electricity, utilities, and safe drinking water in addition to health services related to disinfection and sterilization, and other conditions. Even if these services are provided, the biggest challenge will remain in their effectiveness and success[[7]](#footnote-7). As such, civil society estimates that many migrants are unable to afford food, medicine, and health care. Many immigrant families need cash support, psychological and social counseling, health services and supplies, hygiene kits, and miscellaneous medicines[[8]](#footnote-8). Although the Turkish government launched a $15.4 billion stimulus package to help those affected by the Coronavirus in addition to relieving the most vulnerable groups affected by the virus, this package will not include assistance to migrants in particular among the most vulnerable groups affected by the spread of Corona[[9]](#footnote-9).

**At the level of access to health care,** legal migrants were able to access health services. But many factors hindered their access to those services, such as cultural and language barriers, lack of knowledge about how the health system works, and negative attitudes toward health care workers towards migrants. In addition to the economic obstacles, as some of them fear losing their jobs and therefore did not go to receive treatment for fear of being fired, they may prefer to continue to work when they are sick rather than receive treatment and dismissal from work. There are also still problems in accessing reliable information and information about the health services available in the context of the virus, which affects the level of awareness of legal immigrants in Turkey[[10]](#footnote-10).

On the other hand, illegal immigrants suffer from their inability to obtain proper health care. They do not have the right to access health services except for emergency care and health services related to infectious diseases compared to citizens or legal immigrants who receive all medical services. Estimates indicate that these people resorted to private hospitals to receive treatment from the virus, which increases the financial cost for them by about four times the treatment in government hospitals[[11]](#footnote-11). A presidential decree was issued in April 2020 by the Turkish government to grant everyone who approaches hospitals and is suspected of being infected with the Coronavirus the necessary treatment as part of measures to combat the outbreak, regardless of their health coverage under the social security system. But the fear of illegal immigrants from security tracking, arrest after recovery from the virus, and deportation force them not to approach hospitals and treatment in private clinics[[12]](#footnote-12).

Many illegal immigrants are not getting their masks due to the Turkish government's decision in April 2020 to impose a blanket ban on the sale and free distribution of face masks to citizens with social security. This decision resulted in the deprivation of many groups from obtaining face masks and the necessary supplies to combat the spread of the Coronavirus. Thus, illegal immigrants still face challenges in accessing face masks despite the Turkish government lifting the ban in May 2020. But the lack of equipment to combat the spread of the Coronavirus among illegal immigrants is still present compared to the ease of obtaining them by citizens[[13]](#footnote-13).

In February 2020, the Turkish government unilaterally lifted the strict restrictions on its borders. That led to a sharp increase in the number of migrants trying to enter the European Union, with the Turkish government using this as a card to put pressure on the European Union. Not only that, but Turkey has left these people without health care in the spread of the Coronavirus[[14]](#footnote-14). Later, after the crisis was resolved, these migrants were transferred to quarantine centers for 14 days. However, human rights estimates indicate limited hygiene tools and poor ventilation, in addition to the increase in complaints about the lack of face masks[[15]](#footnote-15). Then the Turkish government sheltered illegal immigrants in sports centers in unsanitary conditions[[16]](#footnote-16).

**Civil society organizations Efforts to help immigrants in light of the spread of the Corona virus**

Turkish local or international civil society organizations have faced obstacles to deliver services to migrants and their families to mitigate the coronavirus effects. However, the measures to limit the coronavirus spread did not take into account the work of these organizations. In March 2020, the Turkish Ministry of Interior sent a set of measures and restrictions imposed on civil society organizations, which contributed to stopping some organizations' activities that help migrants. The government did not facilitate the difficulties encountered by these organizations, especially those related to bank accounts and cash transfers[[17]](#footnote-17).

Despite these obstacles, many civil society organizations and international bodies have undertaken a set of efforts to provide the necessary medical and hygiene tools to combat the spread of the Coronavirus. It also provided information to raise awareness of the disease and the causes of its spread. A group of activists sent messages on the “WhatsApp” application to raise awareness of the disease, in addition to preparing brochures about it with the distribution of masks, hand sanitizers, and sanitary gloves. That is in addition to cooperating with private hospitals to provide medical care at prices lower than the normal price[[18]](#footnote-18). The United Nations Population Fund also provided water supplies, hygiene tools to agricultural workers in Turkey; to introduce them to appropriate hygiene techniques and hand washing that can help prevent the infection with the Coronavirus[[19]](#footnote-19).

In November 2020, the WHO office, with EU funding, distributed 100,000 surgical masks, 8,000 FFP2 masks, 3,000 pairs of goggles, 4,500 coats, and 250 thermometers to 28 centers across Turkey. That is to ensure universal access to medical equipment and health services for all migrants, including irregular migrants[[20]](#footnote-20). Despite these international efforts, the migrants' suffering continues due to the lack of various medical equipment and the restriction of civil society activities in Turkey. All of this prevents the provision of appropriate services to immigrants, especially illegal immigrants, in poor neighborhoods, due to the difficulty of reaching them through these organizations.

**Hate rhetoric towards immigrants escalates in Turkey in the context of the spread of the Corona virus**

Migrants in Turkey were exposed to hate speech, racism, and discrimination during the coronavirus spread; it makes daily life more difficult. Many immigrants fear being stigmatized by the coronavirus[[21]](#footnote-21). Civil society organizations estimate that the coronavirus spread has fueled hatred of immigrants in Turkey. Citizens also see them as the reason for the high unemployment rate in Turkey and the decline of various economic indicators. In this way, people who provide services to illegal immigrants are subjected to verbal and physical attacks by Turkish citizens. In December 2020, in Istanbul Square, a group distributing food to African migrants was insulted and slandered. Speech of incitement against immigrants is spreading on social media, as citizens see them as the reason for the economic crisis during the spread of the coronavirus[[22]](#footnote-22).

Many Afghan immigrants are facing hate speech because they are accused of bringing the virus to Turkey[[23]](#footnote-23). The pandemic has caused an increase in xenophobia and anti-refugee and anti-immigrant sentiment in Turkey[[24]](#footnote-24). In December 2020, the hatred of foreign immigrants from the Armenians increased due to the battles in the Nagorno-Karabakh region between the Armenian forces and the Azerbaijani forces backed by Turkey. Armenians are subjected to numerous attacks in their neighborhoods and harassment from Turkish nationalists[[25]](#footnote-25). The Turkish government is silent about all these crimes; it encourages more such attacks and sometimes extremist nationalist rhetoric. These matters allow the spread of a culture of impunity in Turkish society.

**Recommendations:**

The lack of access to health care and the failure to provide social and economic protection programs for immigrants led to their social and economic suffering. At the same time, the challenges facing Turkish civil society organizations are escalating, thanks to government measures that do not take care of the work of these organizations, allowing them to affect the services they provide to migrants. On the other hand, the Turkish society increases hate speech towards them while bearing the bill of economic failure. That affects their discriminatory status within society. Therefore, Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights, the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, recommends the following:

* The necessity of providing the necessary health care to illegal immigrants, regardless of security considerations, so that they should not be arrested when receiving treatment.
* The necessity of removing all obstacles for migrants to access various services, such as language, economic and cultural barriers.
* The need to combat all racist hate speeches against immigrants, to achieve justice and the necessary legal remedies
* Government measures that limit the effects of the Coronavirus on citizens must include some measures for immigrants, as they are weak and marginalized groups within society.
* The need to allow civil society organizations to play their role in providing various services to immigrants, especially illegal immigrants

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