

Silent Victims of Labor Trafficking: China's Belt and Road workers stranded overseas amid Covid-19 pandemic

China Labor Watch



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Foreword

Since the breakout of the Covid-19 pandemic, hundreds of thousands of Chinese migrant workers stranded overseas have been unable to return home. In response, China Labor Watch started investigating the situation in July 2020. The data in this report are mainly from our correspondence via instant messaging services, phone calls and emails with nearly 100 Chinese workers in eight Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) countries in Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Online citizen reporters and Chinese volunteers in host countries who are concerned about the rights of Chinese workers abroad were also consulted.

We conducted in-depth interviews with 22 Chinese workers who worked or currently work on various BRI projects located in Indonesia, Algeria, Singapore, Jordan, Pakistan, Serbia and other countries. Among the workers we interviewed, we found widespread rights infringements involving: passport detention, restrictions on freedom of movement, excessive work hours up to 12 hours a day and 7 days a week, zero holiday allowance, unpaid wages, issuance of illegal visas, deceptive recruitment and false promises, isolation from the local community, intimidation and threats, high penalties for quitting, lack of sufficient medical treatment, poor living and working conditions, insufficient labor protection and safety equipments, no reasonable complaint channels or grievance mechanism, restricted freedom of speech, and harsh punishment of workers who protest.

They were promised a job with good pay to support their families back in China. Upon arriving in the host countries, however, Chinese employers confiscated their passports, and told them that if they wanted to leave early, they had to pay a penalty for breach of contract, which is often equivalent to several months' worth of their salary. Many workers who do not obtain a work visa are afraid of speaking out about the labor rights abuses they suffered. Even workers who obtain a work visa usually cannot change employers freely, and rarely have any rights to organize unions or strikes. Their basic human rights have been severely violated, but because they are abroad, it is difficult to seek protection under Chinese law, and the Chinese companies that force these workers to work often get away with it.

While millions of Chinese citizens with valid passports were stranded overseas at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Chinese government introduced the strictest travel restrictions in the world - the so-called "Five-One" policy and the "circuit breaker" mechanism to limit the number of international flights coming into China. Such policies have caused airfares to skyrocket with very limited flights available to China. Overseas Chinese workers in BRI stranded abroad have been suffering from endless lockdowns, job loss, poverty, and little hope of returning home. Many of them cannot pass both the Covid-19 nucleic acid PCR test and Covid-19 IgM antibody test that Chinese government requires. Chinese companies also frequently use the excuse of the lack of new laborers from China to stop them from returning home. In our research, we have found that some workers were permanently disabled from untreated work-related injuries due to restriction of movement

and lack of medical care, and many workers suffered disproportionate losses to covid-19 when their workplaces and dormitories became coronavirus hotbeds.

We call on the Chinese government to strengthen the protection of Chinese overseas workers' consulate protection, increase the number of flights back to China from countries and regions where a significant number of Chinese laborers are stranded overseas, and provide charter flights for Chinese laborers. China Labor Watch also advocates for a victim-centered prevention, protection and compensation mechanism for human trafficking victims, including laborers who are forced to work within China and abroad.

1. Overview of Labor Trafficking and Forced Labor in China's Belt and Road Initiative

1.1 Definitions

Human trafficking is a form of modern slavery that violates the human rights of trafficked persons. The internationally accepted definition of human trafficking refers to the process of placing and maintaining women, children, and men in exploitation. Human trafficking is not just a commercial transaction, but can be divided into three common stages: recruitment, transportation, and exploitation. Human traffickers can use many methods to force or trick victims into being trafficked. Victims may be harbored and moved by public or private means of transportation and are eventually forced into labor exploitation, sexual exploitation, forced marriage, organ harvesting, etc. without the option to “just walk away”.

Human trafficking is a crime that has existed since ancient times. However, it was not until the 19th century that the modern concept of human trafficking began to enter the public dialogue of the international community. In the early 20th century, some countries began to formulate laws and international conventions against human trafficking. In 2000, the current internationally recognized definition of human trafficking was legally broadened in the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.

Globalization has increased the flow of labor and goods across national borders dramatically. Traffickers use fraudulent means to move workers from their country of origin to other countries, directly controlling these workers or putting them under control of an employer, exploiting them and profiting from it. Driven by huge profits, this crime is difficult to eradicate. According to estimates by the International Labor Organization, 25 million people are still trapped in forced labor globally¹.

According to the UN Trafficking in Persons Protocol, it does not matter whether the trafficked persons consent, as long as the process results in deception, fraud, coercion or violence against the trafficked persons for exploitation. Under Article 3, the Protocol defines “trafficking in persons” as:

“[...] the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control

¹ [Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage, ILO 2017](#)

over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. Human trafficking may include sex trafficking, forced labor, forced begging, forced marriage, sale of children, and organ trafficking [...]"

Although women and children are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking, men, especially young and middle-aged low-skill laborers from developing countries living in poverty, still face a high risk of becoming victims of forced labor.

After victims are trafficked to their final destination, the most important feature of forced labor is the use of force or coercion. The International Labor Organization defines forced labor or compulsory labour as "all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily."²

Hence if a person cannot leave nonconsensual work due to punishment or threats of punishment, they are in forced labor. The punishment here can refer to detention or physical punishment, or other forms of threat or abuse that can effectively prevent workers from leaving, such as detaining workers' passport or other identity documents to prevent them from moving freely, failing to pay workers' wages, threatening to report workers to immigration agencies for deportation, etc.

1.2 The Belt and Road Initiative and violation of Chinese overseas workers' rights

Although Chinese media and scholars have long been concerned about protecting the rights of Chinese overseas migrant workers, some Chinese overseas workers have faced persistent problems such as passport confiscation, debt bondage, restrictions on freedom of movement and wage theft. These are all strong forced labor risk indicators, and our researchers found out that workers usually contacted Chinese embassy and consulates in the host country when they encountered labor violations, but the Chinese embassy and consulates, while knowing these issues, do not have the corresponding staff and funding to monitor and pursue these violations of overseas workers' fundamental interests and rights.

In 2013, China proposed the Belt and Road Initiative as a geopolitical and geoeconomic remapping. The 'Belt' refers to a land corridor that runs through China, passing through Central Asia and extending to Eastern Europe. The 'Road' refers to a maritime network between ports in China, Southeast Asia, Africa and the Middle East. This ambitious plan proposed by China for global development has now covered more than two-thirds of the world's countries, mainly developing countries in geopolitically sensitive regions. China

² [Forced Labour Convention, 1930](#)

intends to consolidate Beijing's global influence through large-scale infrastructure construction, energy and natural resource development, transportation, industrial construction, investment and other trade activities in these countries.

While using China's wealth and technology to create new markets for Chinese companies, the BRI has also exported China's economic development model of exploiting its own workers at the bottom of society. Many Chinese workers working on BRI projects are forced to live in isolation with passports detained by their employer, and are constantly threatened and intimidated with debt and deportation. They do not have legal work visas, transportation, or medical care. Even if they identify themselves as victims of human trafficking and forced labor, it is very unlikely for them to get out of the plight. In particular, many countries in Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Africa, where many emerging projects of the BRI are located, do not have comprehensive anti-trafficking laws and policies due to historical, cultural, and colonial factors. The host countries often lack an effective criminal justice system preventing human trafficking and forced labor crimes. Resources are also insufficient to provide victims with personal safety protection, legal assistance, temporary shelters and medical services.

At the same time, China lacks specific legislation to protect Chinese laborers abroad. China's Labor Law and Labor Contract Law have no effect abroad, so it is difficult to protect workers overseas. After the reform of Chinese government institutions in 2008, the government function protecting the rights and interests of overseas workers was transferred from the Ministry of Labor and Social Security to the Ministry of Commerce, but the main responsibility of the Ministry of Commerce is about economy and trade, not labor protection. China does not have a government agency specifically dedicated to the protection and management of overseas workers' protection, and Chinese embassies and consulates have not set up an agency specifically responsible for overseas labor affairs.

China lacks sufficient and effective data on human trafficking. Also, according to the 1997 Criminal Law, only women and children can be legally recognized as trafficking victims. The abduction of adult men and their exploitation does not constitute the crime of human trafficking. As a result, China's Criminal Law only convicts and punishes those who traffic adult men into forced labor if the victims are found with intentional injury or in illegal detention. However, without the intervention of criminal law enforcement officials in China and the country where the labor is located, it is nearly impossible for Chinese overseas workers to collect evidence and file lawsuits. We found that if workers are found trying to collect evidence such as photos and videos, or even talk to other workers about labor rights violations, they will be warned by their employers.

These factors mean that the rights and interests of Chinese adult male workers - who may have been trafficked to work in countries where the BRI projects are located - cannot be effectively protected. Usually neither the host country nor China (the country of origin) has a

strong enough criminal justice system to investigate, prosecute and convict the perpetrators. Furthermore, there is no victim-centered prevention, protection, or compensation mechanism.

In order to understand the real living and working conditions of Chinese overseas workers and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on them, China Labor Watch has conducted this research project. We found that with China's economy increasingly under pressure, the slowing down of the construction sector and fewer jobs being available near home, many Chinese workers from poor rural areas hope to find higher-paying jobs overseas to support their families. However, they often find themselves stuck in the ongoing exploitation by recruiters, subcontractors, and employers both in China and the host countries. Almost all overseas workers are compelled to pay large recruitment fees or security deposits, and forced to sign illegal contracts restricting their rights. Because they are often put on tourist visas and face the threat of deportation or losing their jobs by their employers, many workers who do not obtain a work visa are afraid of speaking out about the labor rights abuses they suffered. Even workers who obtain a work visa usually cannot change employers freely, and rarely have any rights to organize unions or strikes. When these workers who traveled tens of thousands miles away from home to work in a foreign land encounter abuses such as withholding wages, detaining passports, forced overtime work, and limiting access to healthcare, their ability to look for social protection and fight for their rights are severely constrained. Additionally, China's strict air travel restrictions and the skyrocketing flight prices during the pandemic have made the journey home for these overseas workers extremely difficult.

Article 12, paragraph 4 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) signed by the Chinese government in 1998 states that "No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of the right to enter his own country." But when millions of Chinese citizens with valid passports were stranded overseas at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Chinese government introduced the strictest travel restrictions in the world - the so-called "Five-One" policy and the "circuit breaker" mechanism to limit the number of international flights coming into China. Such policies have caused airfares to skyrocket with very limited flights available to China. Many overseas Chinese workers are stranded abroad, especially in Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, and have been suffering from endless lockdowns, job loss, poverty, and little hope of returning home. In recent months, articles, photos, and comments on Chinese social media (such as WeChat) sharing the plight of overseas Chinese workers are often quickly censored, leading the outside world to have little understanding of their dire situation.

1.3 Methodology

China Labor Watch carried out research for this report between August 2020 and April 2021. The data in this report are mainly derived from nearly 100 Chinese workers in 8 BRI

countries in Asia, the Middle East and Africa other online citizen reporters and Chinese volunteers in host countries who are concerned about the rights of Chinese workers abroad.

We conducted in-depth interviews via instant messaging softwares, phone calls and emails with 22 Chinese workers who worked or currently work on various BRI projects located in Indonesia, Algeria, Singapore, Jordan, Pakistan, Serbia and other countries, and found that the following infringements are widespread: passport detention, restrictions on freedom of movement, excessive overtime, no holidays, unpaid wages, workers being forced to work with illegal visas, deceptive recruitment and false promises, isolation from the local community, intimidation and threats, high penalties if workers want to leave their jobs early, lack of medical treatment, poor living and working conditions, insufficient labor protection and safety equipments, no reasonable complaint channels or grievance mechanism, restricted freedom of speech, and harsh punishment of workers who lead protests.

We analyzed documents including labor contracts, workers’ complaints, collective petitions, personal letters calling for help, internal corporate documents, statements from Chinese embassies and consulates, and work records of volunteer groups. We also analyzed media news reports, academic articles, international law and Chinese laws and policies, and China’s state reports on Chinese overseas workers.

We used the snowball sampling method to find most of our interviewees. This method is especially suitable for those who are difficult to reach. In order to protect the privacy of participants, we have replaced the interviewees’ names with numbers and concealed their identifiable information. Almost all interviewees were fearful of complaining about their situation because they were concerned about reprisals from their employers, such as being turned over to local authorities for jail time or deportation, physical and mental abuses, wage deductions, fines, or not being permitted to go home.

1.4 Forced labor

ILO indicators of forced labor	What China Labor Watch found	Interviewees
Abuse of vulnerability	Among the workers we interviewed, the least educated ones had only elementary school education. These workers had difficulty writing and did not know how to defend their rights when abused. They did not understand the language of the host country or English, could not communicate or seek help, and were not permitted to leave the work site. These workers were mainly employed by labor supply agencies or	#1 - #22

	<p>subcontractors and relied entirely on the employer to provide accommodation and meals. When the employer told them that due to the high price of air tickets, they were not allowed to return to China, they had no other choice than to stay and continue working.</p>	
Deception	<p>Almost all of the workers we interviewed were deceptively recruited from China to work abroad. For example, the wages and labor protection equipment promised by employers were not fulfilled. Labor supply agencies would also promise to apply for legal work visas for the workers, but only when the workers arrived, they realized that they were put on tourist or business visas that made them illegally employed. However, they were too afraid to ask the local police for help due to concerns of being deported.</p> <p>When a worker's labor contract is up - if there is one - the short-term tourist or business visa would have already expired, so the worker often needs to pay a customs fine before they are permitted to leave the country.</p>	#1 - #22
Restriction of movement	<p>The workers we interviewed in Singapore were all arranged to live in group dormitories where the BRI infrastructure projects are located. Gates of the work site were guarded by security guards. Workers were not allowed to go out without the permission and escort of management and translators.</p>	#1, #2, #7, #10 & #15 -#20
Isolation	<p>Many of the BRI projects are located in remote areas or in newly-built industrial parks owned or occupied by Chinese companies. Besides, workers have to work long hours without holidays. Their days are spent between dormitories and construction sites. Most workers use WeChat on mobile phones to stay in touch with their families. Otherwise, there is no opportunity to contact the outside world.</p>	#1 - #22

Physical violence	We have found that in some Chinese steel and mining companies, workers are frequently detained and beaten by the company's security guards due to disobedience, attempting to strike, or other disputes with management. In a WeChat group of Chinese steel workers in Indonesia, someone posted a video of a worker being repeatedly reprimanded and slapped until the uniform was covered with blood from his nose. Then other members of the group commented that a factory's translator was the one who beat them.	#15, #17 & #18
Intimidation and threats	Intimidation and threats are common for controlling Chinese workers in forced labor at some BRI projects. The most commonly used threats include deportation, reprisal after returning home, high fines and penalties. It is also common to force workers to sign a waiver of rights to sue the employer and to force workers to delete evidence of labor rights violations on their phones. In a WeChat group of a large Chinese steel company in Indonesia, after a worker fell from height while working, another worker in the group asked, "Did someone fall during the installation of steel structures today? How is he?" A manager from the company immediately tagged him in the WeChat group and questioned which subcontractor he belonged to, trying to identify the potential troublemaker.	#17 & #18
Retention of identity documents	The passports of all the workers we interviewed were confiscated while working abroad. Generally, upon arrival at the work destination, their passports were taken away right after getting off the plane. Sometimes when a worker desperately wanted to return to China in an emergency, such as the death of their family members or personal injuries, it was not an option because they were not in possession of their passports.	#1 - #22
Withholding of wages	Most workers interviewed by China Labor Watch said they had problems receiving salaries from	#2, #7, #9, #10, #16, #20 & #21

	<p>their employers. There are consistent late payments of salaries and unexplained deductions.</p> <p>A worker who went to Jordan worked in the desert for five months but only received his salary for the first six days. In Algeria, when an installation project of a subcontracting company was close to completion in 2019, two workers were left behind for maintenance and installation. They could not refuse the arrangement because their employer threatened them with six months of salary that had not yet been paid. They did not get paid until October 2020 due to the resignation of the former manager, which is equivalent to 16 months of wages in arrears, and the workers had to borrow money for food.</p> <p>The better situation among the workers we interviewed was when the wages were paid two months after being delayed, that is, in the first two months of work, they were only provided with food and dormitory, and the first month's salary was paid in the third month. The worse situation would be when the salary was paid once every six months or more, not in full, sometimes only in half.</p>	
Debt bondage	<p>We found that in addition to paying a recruitment fee ranging from thousands to tens of thousands yuan (approximately US\$155-1,550+), Chinese workers who go abroad for work are also told by their employers that they must repay a debt if they decide to return to China once they arrive abroad (employers usually call it a penalty). If a worker is unable to repay the debt, he will not be allowed to return to China, and must work for the employer for a few months without compensation. A worker who used to work in Algeria but is now in Angola said that he was forced to pay a penalty of 17,000 yuan (approximately US\$2,630) before being permitted to leave Algeria.</p>	#1, #16, #19 & #20

	<p>Another worker who has already returned to China said that he was forced to work in Algeria for five months. He should have earned a total salary of more than 26,000 yuan (approximately US\$4,030), but after the employer deducted the penalty for his early return to China, he only got 1,800 yuan (approximately US\$280).</p> <p>Another worker who returned from Saudi Arabia said that he was forced to work for six months without receiving a penny. This kind of penalty for early return is a debt trap set by employers and the amount is usually between five and six months of a worker’s wage. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the price of air tickets from most countries where the BRI projects are located to China has increased up to ten times, and is even higher when some flights are suspended with only charter flights available. Many employers refused to pay for the promised round-trip international air tickets for workers, imposing an extra debt as high as 20,000 to 30,000 yuan (approximately US\$3,100 to US\$4,650) on workers. If workers cannot bear the debt, they cannot return to China and are forced to continue working abroad.</p>	
<p>Abusive working and living conditions</p>	<p>The workers we interviewed reported that there was often little labor protection on work sites and the safety was also very poor. One worker we contacted was paralyzed after he was hit on the waist by a hammer that fell from a height. Another worker’s eye was injured due to the lack of proper protective equipment, and another worker was injured after falling on the construction site. After some workers were injured at work, they could not get treatment in time due to poor medical services at the project site. Some workers asked to return to China for treatment and were not allowed. As a result, untreated work injuries gradually worsened and even caused permanent disability.</p>	<p>#6, #11, #12, #16 & #17</p>

	In November 2020, a worker at Tsingshan Steel's plant in Indonesia's Weda Bay Industrial Park was killed by a ladle truck at work. In a video provided by a coworker, the on-site management staff can be heard calling the video shooter to stop immediately and leave the scene.	
Excessive overtime	The workers we interviewed reported that their employers used various excuses to extend their working hours. The worst case is 12 hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year, with no off days. The promise of working hours was completely different. In addition to excessive working hours, there is also an issue of forced extension of the contract. During the pandemic, many workers' labor contracts expired, but their employers told them that due to the pandemic, replacement workers from China would not be able to arrive in time, hence they must continue to work and cannot return to China.	#8, #9, 10, #16, #20 & #21

WARNING: GRAPHIC IMAGES CONTAINED ON THE NEXT PAGE (p.13)



A worker died at work after being pinned between a ladle truck and a wall



A worker beaten in workplace

1.5 Other labor rights abuses

Other labor rights abuses	What China Labor Watch found	Interviewees
No healthcare provided	<p>Some workers we interviewed said that if they felt unwell, their employers would not let them see a doctor. The employer would only give them some over-the-counter anti-inflammatory drugs. The workers have no means of transportation, do not speak a second language, and cannot go to the hospital on their own. Some workers who were injured at work suffered permanent disabilities because they did not receive medical treatment for several months. After a worker from a Chinese mining company in Indonesia was diagnosed positive for Covid-19 in November 2020, he was put in isolation in an empty dormitory room for more than 20 days without any medical treatment. Later other workers found his dead body in the dormitory.</p>	#1, #15, #17, #18, #19 & #20
One-sided labor contracts	<p>It is common that employers do not provide labor contracts or include clauses that seriously harm the rights and interests of workers. For example, a copy of a labor contract provided by a worker includes the following clauses:</p> <p>"If Party B has a work-related injury, Party B needs to be diagnosed at a hospital recognized by Party A and gets a doctor's note before taking leave. Only the base wage will be paid. If workers can not work due to other illnesses, bad weather, or other reasons, no wages will be paid."</p> <p>"Regardless of any injury, death, illness or disability of any nature that happens to Party B abroad, the family and relatives of Party B shall not request to go abroad to visit and make arrangements for the deceased for any reason, and Party A shall handle everything in accordance with local customs."</p>	#20

High fines and penalties	Two workers who had worked in Indonesia told us that they would be fined by the company if they are caught breaking the factory's rules and regulations at work, gambling, fighting with locals or fighting when drunk. The maximum fine is 50,000 yuan (approximately US\$7,740).	#17 & #18
Being resold by labor brokers or sub-contractors	Some workers we interviewed stated that they were resold by labor brokers or sub-contractors abroad. For example, a worker working for a project contracted by China Construction Second Engineering Bureau noticed that all his co-workers were from different private bosses and none of them were directly employed. He was resold twice, and a certain percentage of his salary was drawn as an introduction fee for each middle-man, so the salary he got was less than half of what was paid by the contractor.	#2, #19 & #20
No grievance mechanisms	<p>Chinese overseas workers in remote construction sites or enclosed industrial parks likened their workplace to prisons. Only management, security guards and co-workers hired can be seen every day. There is no freedom of movement and no organizations that provide assistance or support.</p> <p>Neither investigative journalists nor NGOs can easily access their work sites. When some volunteers tried to contact the contractor of a project or the head office of the industrial park. The reply was that these workers were all recruited by sub-contractors, and the head office did not have the authority to intervene in the recruitment and management of various subcontracting companies. This is a legal loophole, one where workers' rights violations will only become more serious.</p>	#2, #7, #15, #17 & #18
No consular protection	Several workers said they tried to call the Chinese Embassy to report that their passports were detained by their employing company. The embassy's reply was that it had no right to intervene and the workers were told to file a report at the local police station. However, these workers cannot even get out of the	#2, #7, #15, #17 & #20

	<p>gate of the work site, and they also face language barriers. It is quite unrealistic for them to call the local police. Moreover, workers are afraid that they will be punished or fined if the police find out that they do not have legal work status.</p>	
No free speech	<p>A worker told China Labor Watch that in an industrial park of a Chinese steel company in Indonesia, after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the company only acted to isolate workers with fever symptoms and block any news spreading online. The company also encouraged employees to turn in anyone who speaks online. Workers are afraid to send messages of the actual coronavirus infections in the WeChat group, because their phone will be confiscated and locked up if caught.</p> <p>Two volunteers we interviewed who are concerned about stranded overseas Chinese workers told us that what they published on their personal accounts about overseas migrant workers were often deleted by WeChat admins within a few hours. Once, after publishing an article mentioning a specific company name, an author received a call from the Chinese Embassy and company executives, telling him to delete the article and not to continue to focus on these workers.</p>	#7, #17 & #18
Verbal abuse and mental abuse	<p>A worker in Indonesia said that being insulted by management happened all the time. If family incidents occurred, first management personnel blamed the workers, then fined them. A worker in Algeria applied to return to the country after the death of his father. The management just told him that anyone's application for returning to China was passed on to the headquarters, and said, "You are hired by the boss. I didn't ask you to come here. I recommend his WeChat account. If you have any problems, contact the boss directly."</p>	#17 & #20



A photo posted in a workers' WeChat group. The member who posted the photo said it was his coworker who died in the dorm after being tested positive for coronavirus and put in isolation for more than 20 days without medical care.



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Weixin Official Accounts Platform Operation Center

WeChat's notice to a user stating the article posted on his official account about stranded overseas Chinese workers has been deleted

1.6 How Many Chinese Workers Are Living Abroad?

According to data from the "Annual Report on China International Labour Cooperation" published by the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, as of the end of

December 2018, China's overseas labor cooperation companies had dispatched a total of 9,514,000 Chinese workers overseas, and the number of Chinese workers abroad at the end of that year was 997,000.

Overseas workers generally send a large portion of their wages back to their home countries. There is currently no accurate data on the number of overseas Chinese workers and the amount of remittances and money sent back to China is a good indication of the number of workers overseas. In recent years, China has been the world's second receiver of remittances after India (17 million migrants³), which shows there are a large number of overseas Chinese workers. China Labor Watch interviewed a number of overseas Chinese workers who said they are facing many challenges including modern slavery, abuse and exploitation, contract violations, withholding of wages, low wages, dismal working conditions, discrimination, cultural conflicts, lack of legal protection, social and political exclusion in the country of residence. Most of our interviewees work illegally with tourist or business visas and they are likely not included into the statistics provided by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce.

2. Victims' Stories

2.1 Victim A's story

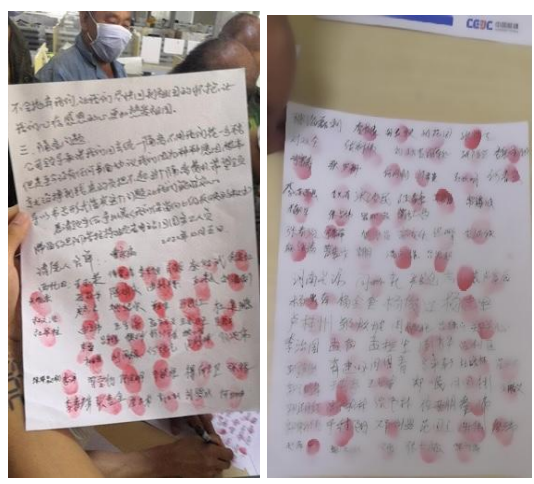
More and more Chinese construction companies operating overseas commit to large infrastructure projects backed by Chinese financing. A worker who recently returned to China after spending nine hellish months in Jordan (Victim A) told China Labor Watch his experience. Victim A was introduced by a friend of his father to work at the Attarat oil shale-fueled power plant, and arrived in Jordan in December 2019. Victim A was first promised a good wage and a fair contract in China, then was told that the contract would be signed at the airport. But when Victim A finally arrived, his passport was taken away from him immediately after he got off the plane. There was no contract and Victim A was told if he insisted on leaving, he had to pay 8,000 yuan (approximately US\$1,240).

Victim A could not afford the fine so he had no choice but to stay. He was placed in a temporary dormitory made of thin steel sheets in the desert. It was so hot that he could not sleep even after a long day of hard work. Victim A worked for four months from December 2019 to April 2020, but only got paid once for one week in December. With almost no income, Victim A had to call his family in China to wire him money for daily living expenses or ask to borrow money from other workers. When the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, the workers were provided no personal protection equipment until the worksite was inspected by Jordanian government officials. They were then provided with one mask per week. In April, the work assigned to Victim A was finally finished. He and other workers asked to return to China, but every time workers confronted the Chinese staff at the project office, local security

³ United Nations: International migrant stock 2019

guards were called to expel them. The staff also threatened to call the immigration officers to arrest the Chinese workers because they were all on tourist visas instead of work permits. When Victim A and other workers went to the Chinese embassy to protest, his family in China received a phone call from the local Chinese police warning them if he continued to participate in the protest, he would be “put on a blacklist and never be permitted to enter China again”. Nevertheless, the workers protested weekly in front of the Chinese embassy in Jordan. After four months of protesting, the workers were finally put on a charter flight and returned to China in mid-August. However, as far as he knows, there are still more than 300 Chinese workers who are stranded in the same worksite of the Attarat power plant.

The Attarat oil shale-fueled power plant is a US\$1.6 billion project with the loan wholly provided by Chinese banks, with Industrial and Commercial Bank of China and Bank of China as mandated lead arrangers. China Construction Bank and Export-Import Bank of China also provided loans to the project. This is the largest Chinese project financing for a private infrastructure project in Jordan and conforms to China’s “One Belt One Road Initiative” launched by Xi Jinping. The engineering, procurement and construction contract was awarded to Guangdong Power Engineering Corporation, a subsidiary of China Energy Engineering Group.



Victim A’s appeal letter signed collectively by the workers

2.2 Victim B’s story

A Chinese worker who is still stranded in Oran, Algeria (Victim B) told China Labor Watch his experience. Victim B’s passport was taken away immediately after he arrived in Algeria around two years ago. Among all the workers on the same plane with him, about half of them decided to return to China after they realized that their passports would be detained. But those who chose to go back before the termination date of the contract had to pay for a high penalty of as much as 35,000 yuan (approximately US\$5,420), plus the loss of recruitment/placement fees ranging from 5,000 yuan to 20,000 yuan (approximately US\$770 to US\$3,100). If a

worker could not pay the penalty, they had to work for five to six months without wages in order to be allowed to leave by the employer.

Victim B first signed a fixed term contract of two years with Wuhan Linxi Construction company. Four months ago, Victim B's contract was up, but his employer refused to buy him a flight ticket as the price of an air ticket to China was above what was written in the contract (tickets as high as \$US5,880). The labor contract which Victim B was forced to sign was full of illegal terms, such as no guarantee on hourly wage or working hours, forbidding visits to his family in China during his two-year commitment, etc. Victim B was only paid twice a year in the past two years, with unlawful deductions made to his wages. The labor broker had promised Victim B in China that he would get paid 280 yuan (approximately US\$43) per day, but what he actually got was only 165 yuan (approximately US\$26) per day. Victim B has no paid leave, so if he took a day off he would not get paid.

Victim B said that there are 70 to 80 workers on his worksite who are in a similar situation in that they desperately want to return home but are unable to. Since Victim B's contract expired, he had been arranged by his former employer to work for a project building military officers' domities in Oran by the China Construction Second Engineering Bureau Ltd., but the latter refused to provide a written employment contract for him. Victim B witnessed that the contractor used almost exclusively other small private companies' workers. However, the private company managers would take a large commission out of workers' pay. Victim B's current salary is less than half of what his previous employer paid.

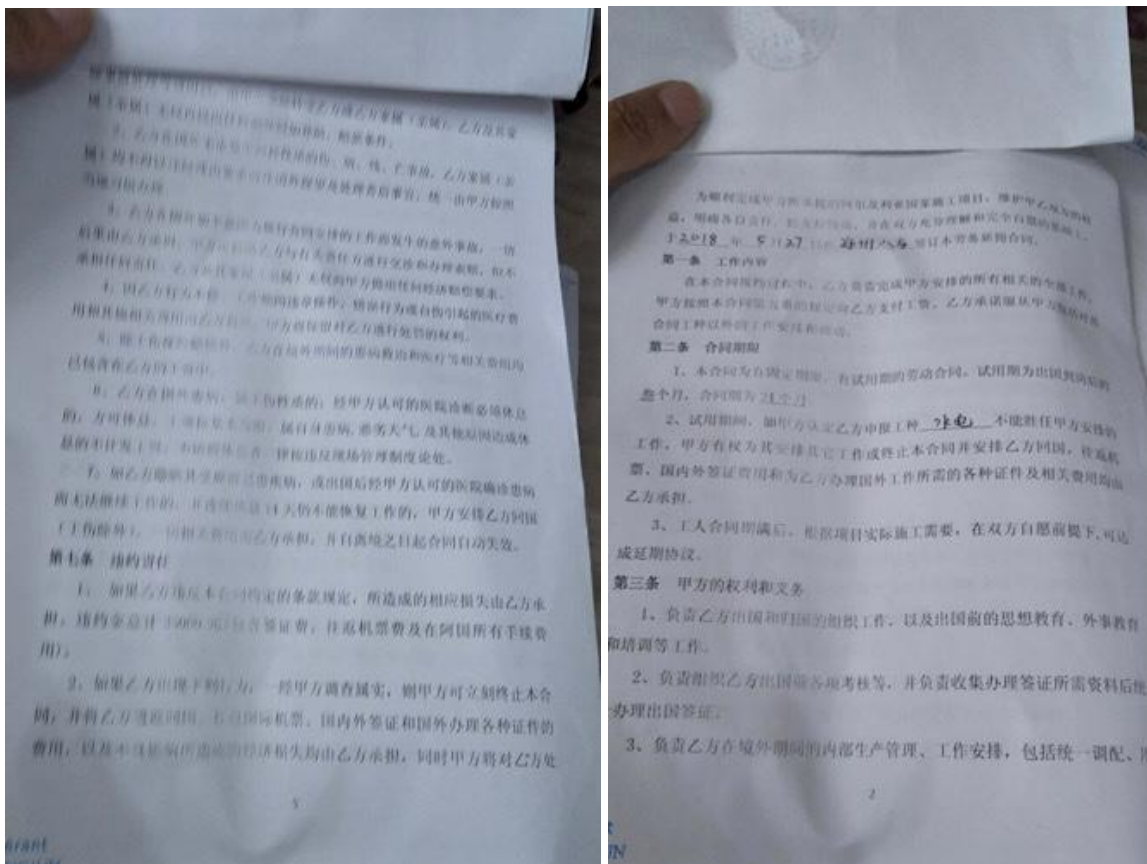
Victim B initially traveled to Algeria on a tourist visa arranged by the recruitment agency which expired long ago. Now he wants to return home desperately but does not know what to do.

As the largest country in Africa by area, Algeria is called a high-quality partner of the BRI by China, serving as a leading role model. According to the Guidelines for Countries and Regions on Overseas Investment and Cooperation issued by the Ministry of Commerce of China, strikes at Chinese enterprises in Algeria occur from time to time, mostly caused by labor disputes. The main cause for dispute is the illegal and multi-layered subcontracting, resulting in disconnected project management, delayed construction period, and failures in protecting workers' rights. In addition, because of the lack of clear contracts, companies and workers are often unsure of their respective rights and obligations, resulting in heated arguments on the labor relationships and dispute settlement.

The same guideline issued by the Ministry of Commerce in China also mentioned that Algerian laws stipulate that when hiring foreign workers, an application must be submitted to the local labor department to obtain foreign labor quotas. Visa applications must be approved by the Ministry of Labor and Employment and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which could be complicated. After entering the country, foreign workers need to apply for a labor permit,

which is valid for 2 years and can be extended. In addition, foreign workers should apply to the local police station for a residence permit. All foreign employees should enjoy local social insurance, and companies must provide insurance for foreign employees in accordance with regulations.

However, all workers in Algeria interviewed by China Labor Watch stated that they were told by management staff to hand in their passports for safekeeping. They had no labor permit or residence permit, and no social insurance. If they were sick, they could only endure without seeing a doctor.



A labor contract provided by Victim B stating that he is subject to a penalty of 35,000 yuan (approximately US\$5,420) if he breaks the agreement (returns to China early)

2.3 Victim C's story

A worker who recently returned to China from Indonesia (Victim C) told China Labor Watch that he was tricked by an intermediary into working on a Tsingshan Steel project site in Indonesia as a warehouse clerk, driving a tricycle to change oxygen and propane, and delivering water to the workers. Victim C started working after only one day of training. There were no off days, and he would only rest if he felt too tired. There was no pay for taking a day off, and if he took too many days off, he would be punished and not be able to

go to work until he begged the management. Victim C considered himself as a victim of forced labor and had no freedom.

Victim C said that the company holds morning meetings for workers everyday, which is actually a way of brainwashing workers. Where workers were disobedient or violated factory regulations, they would be forced to pay huge fines to the company. For example, if the safety belt is not hooked up, the worker will be fined 10,000 yuan (approximately US\$1,550) in cash that must be handed over to the company within three days of receiving the ticket, otherwise the fine will be doubled. If workers start a fight, the fine is 50,000 yuan (approximately US\$7,740), fines for gambling are 500 to 1,000 yuan (approximately US\$77 to US\$155), disturbances under influence of alcohol and parking in the wrong place both range from 500 to 2,000 yuan (approximately US\$77 to US\$310), and various construction work site violations range from 2,000 to 20,000 yuan (approximately US\$310 to US\$3,100). Workers were required to be obedient like prisoners and accept militarized management. Workers were told to make themselves strong to endure hardships and withstand hard work. The passports of the workers were all detained by the company, and no labor contracts that clearly agreed on the wage standards were signed.

Victim C applied to return to China in March, 2020, but the company forced him to stay on the construction site and continue working. He applied again in June, 2020, but was still not allowed to return home. In mid-July, Victim C fell down at work and lost function in one leg. The nearest hospital was half a day away from the project, and the company never not provided any medical treatment to the injured worker for three months. In the first month, Victim C was unable to take care of himself, unable to walk or bathe. Without any treatment, the injured leg gradually deformed and shrank, and Victim C could only walk on crutches.

When Victim C contacted China Labor Watch, he had been stranded in a hotel near Jakarta Airport along with over a hundred of workers from the same Chinese company for two months. These workers all had been infected by the coronavirus due to lack of protection and poor hygiene in their workplaces and dorms. The company had refused to arrange for them to return to China, saying their PCR and antibodies test results were unqualified. However, Victim C told us that after many tests, all indicators were normal, but the company still refused to arrange his return flight or let him buy an air ticket. About a hundred workers were detained in this hotel for the same excuse. They could only stay in their own rooms and could not go outside or visit other workers. Many workers were in distress, cursing or yelling like crazy. Victim C believed that Tsingshan and the Chinese Embassy were afraid that the imported coronavirus cases would trigger the “circuit breaker” mechanism under China’s “Five-One Policy” and the flight would be suspended. Therefore each flight was only approved for a few workers to board, so that potential positive results would be controlled under five and would not affect the airline’s flight. No workers knew why the workers of Tsingshan were only permitted to board Xiamen Airlines and China Southern Airlines. Victim C said that it was the first time he went to work abroad. Because the company did not

provide him any medical treatment for a work-related injury, Victim C lost part of the function of one leg. Even if Victim C could return home, he would be disabled for life. Victim C was filled with dread about his future.

2.4 Shi Zuoyuan's story

According to China's Ministry of Commerce, China had more than 200,000 workers in Africa at the end of 2018, mainly in the construction industry. Since March 2020, most flights from Africa to China have been cancelled and paused. A large number of Chinese workers who planned to return to China were stranded in Africa.

China Labor Watch contacted Shi Zuoyuan, a 60-year-old worker in Algeria, originally from Ganyu in northern Jiangsu Province and currently working in Boufarik in northern Algeria. His relative said that he has been working in Africa for seven to eight years and spent most of the year abroad. After he fell ill in March 2020, he has been asking his employer to arrange for him to return to China so he can receive medical treatment. However, his request was rejected by Cao Yuan (known as "Cao the interpreter"), a subcontractor for overseas workers from northern Jiangsu Province and southern Shandong Province. Shi Zuoyuan's symptoms include dizziness and headache. X-rays showed there were obvious plaques on the cervical aorta. Cao Yuan and Han Peiliang (another individual in charge of the subcontracting team located in Nigeria) could not be reached by phone, or they hung up immediately after picking up.

The subcontractors told Shi Zuoyuan that he still had to continue to work in Algeria because "there are no flights" at the moment and he could only return home in November. He can not allowed to leave before the construction project is completed. Since the management team was unable to recruit new workers from China to replace workers who wanted to go home, workers must remain overseas even if they are ill.

The threat of the pandemic, the lack of healthcare, language barriers, and low income are the main difficulties encountered by Chinese workers. "They work every day for ten hours a day. Some skilled workers might earn 250 yuan a day." said Shi Qing, Shi Zuoyuan's uncle and a City Councillor in Alberta, Canada. He believes that the Chinese government's refusal to arrange charter flights for these workers to return to China is largely to prevent imported cases of Covid-19 into China. Even if workers wish to return home, there are simply too many hoops to jump through. First, they have to get hold of their passports. They then need to know how to book flights online, make payments, and apply for transit visas in English or other local languages. Those who fall ill are the most helpless ones. They don't know where to go to see a doctor, and often solely rely on the subcontractors to explain their symptoms to the doctor. Even if they receive translation assistance from subcontractors, they are often only prescribed antibiotics no matter what their symptoms are.

China Labor Watch learned from Shi Zuoyuan that his passport was taken away by an individual in charge of the subcontracting team, who said he was ensuring all workers' passports would be kept in a safe place. Shi Zuoyuan had no choice but to continue working for them. Shi Zuoyuan also wasn't allowed to keep a copy of the signed employment contract. The company, China Meihua Construction LLC registered in Guangyuan, Sichuan Province, had advertised in China online as an employer having various construction projects in Algeria since 2005.

His family eventually paid over 30,000 yuan (approximately US\$4,650) out of pocket for his air ticket returning to China due to his deteriorated health.

2.5 Victim D's story

An employee who worked for a Chinese mining company in Indonesia (Victim D) told China Labor Watch that he was deeply shocked by workers' exploitation in the process of shifting excess production capacity under BRI. For example, steelmaking furnaces emit a lot of dust, but Chinese companies generally do not use appropriate equipment to reduce or recycle the dust. The local government in Indonesia is corrupt and does not care after receiving bribes from Chinese companies, but the hazardous dust particles will cause adverse work environment impact and harm workers' physical health long after, causing silicosis. Alongside dangerous work environments, some Chinese companies in Indonesia use large fines, corporal punishment, and arbitrary detention to control workers. The seizing of workers' passports is common practice.

Victim D pointed out that there are at least 200,000 Chinese workers in Indonesia. But there are only about 50,000 work visas officially issued by the Indonesian government, leaving 80% of employees in Chinese steel and mining companies on business visas - which is illegal. However, the Indonesian government turned a blind eye to this after accepting bribes from Chinese companies.

The payment of salaries at his company was always delayed. The factory workers responsible for operating the equipment should be paid monthly, but they were always paid two months later - that is, the salary of the first month will be paid in the third month. For workers from multiple subcontractors all over China responsible for construction, civil engineering and equipment installation, some were paid once every three months, and only 80% of the wages were paid each time. Workers were not allowed to return to China after the expiration of their contract, and they were forced to continue working.

In 2020, there were many demonstrations by Indonesian workers and local Indonesian residents against Chinese steel and mining companies. During the latest conflict, the company that Victim D worked for forced some Chinese workers to guard the factory, and issued steel pipes and stones to these workers, ordering them to use these as weapons to attack Indonesian

demonstrators who tried to breach the factory. As a result, more than a dozen Chinese workers were injured in the conflict.



Chinese workers forced to guard their factory with issued steel pipes as weapons to attack Indonesian demonstrators

In the same factory, a Chinese worker injured his left eye at work on July 27, 2020. The worker went to the person in charge of the subcontracting company and asked to see a doctor. Not only did he not receive treatment, the person in charge also called security guards at the factory and detained the injured worker for more than three hours. Later, the injured worker was sent to the hospital but the local medical services were poor and could not treat eye injuries. The next day, the worker asked the subcontractor to arrange him to return to China for treatment, but the subcontractor said that the general contractor would not allow anyone to return to China and told him, "If you become blind, it is what it is."

The worker was forced to continue working since he was injured and has not received any treatment. Now he has lost vision in his injured left eye.



The injured worker showing his blind eye resulting from lack of treatment following a work-related injury

2.6 A shared story from Singapore

China Labor Watch has interviewed multiple Chinese migrant workers in Singapore and Singaporean Chinese volunteers who have provided material and psychological support to the workers. Because the Singaporean government has a strict specialized management system for foreign workers, these workers are arranged to live in crowded dormitories. They could not avoid contracting the coronavirus. They also faced similar barriers in defending their rights. Therefore, we have combined several workers' stories in an overview here.

According to data from the Ministry of Commerce's "Annual Report on China's International Labour Cooperation 2018-2019", China's actual migrant labor force in Singapore exceeds 150,000, accounting for about 10% of Singapore's total foreign labor⁴. The majority of them are employed in low-skilled, low wage positions in construction, manufacturing, catering, transportation, etc. According to a report by National Business Daily, "A 'time bomb' detonated the pandemic, Singapore's GDP hits a 10-year low"⁵, there are about 200,000 foreign workers living in 43 government-approved and purpose-built labor dormitories in Singapore, and about 100,000 foreign workers live in remodeled dormitories or small temporary dormitories built on-site in their workplaces. At the foreign labor dormitories, there are usually about 12 to 20 workers living together in each room. They share public facilities such as toilets and showers, and eat in common areas. The entire dormitory is overcrowded with poor sanitary conditions. It is impossible to maintain six-foot or even three-foot of social distance. After the Singaporean government realized that the coronavirus was spreading rapidly among foreign workers, it began to strictly isolate foreign workers' dormitories on April 7th to separate migrant workers from the community. Foreign workers were not allowed to leave their dormitories for weeks, sometimes months while waiting to be tested. In August, the Singaporean government completed Covid-19 testing for all migrant workers in dormitories and allowed most workers to return to work. But workers are only allowed to go out for work. Most of the time they are still locked away. A local volunteer group told China Labor Watch in September that the recurring outbreaks in migrant labor dormitories had placed more than 10,000 migrant workers back into quarantine. The entire building would be put under lockdown when one confirmed case of Covid-19 is found. In some cases, migrant workers could not even leave the dormitory for a medical appointment.

In Singapore, nearly 95% (or about 53,000) of the 57,000 Covid-19 cases have been foreign migrant workers living in overcrowded dormitories. According to Lianhe Zaobao on August 1⁶, the 396 new cases of Covid-19 in Singapore of the day included 390 migrant workers

⁴ [Annual Report on China's International Labour Cooperation 2018-2019](#), the Ministry of Commerce of PRC and China International Contractors Association, May 2020.

⁵ "一颗'定时炸弹'引爆疫情, 新加坡GDP创十年来新低", 每日经济新闻, Apr 24, 2020.

⁶ "感染率超过15% 我国每6.5个宿舍客工就有一人染病", 联合早报, Aug 1, 2020.

living in dormitories. The total infection rate of migrant workers in dormitories had exceeded 15%, which means about 1 in 6.5 migrant workers in dormitories had been infected. As of September 21, the Covid-19 infection rate has reached 16.82% among migrant worker dorm residents, which is more than 400 times higher than the Singaporean population⁷. As of December 13, 2020, 54,505 dormitory residents have tested positive using the PCR test and another 98,289 have tested serology-positive though they did not have a positive PCR test. In total, almost 50% of 323,000 dormitory dwellers of foreign migrant workers in Singapore have been infected⁸.

Out of a total of 29 Covid-19 related deaths, three are Chinese migrant workers. Their names, ages, and hometowns are:

Gu Zhensefei, 51 years old, from Qidong, Nantong, Jiangsu Province.

Wu Liyou, 41 years old, from Feidong County, Anhui Province.

Yang Xiaolei, 42 years old from Donghai, Lianyungang, Jiangsu Province.

Unfortunately, Yang Xiaolei was hospitalized and discharged after being diagnosed with Covid-19. He died suddenly during isolation in a hotel arranged by the hospital. His body was only discovered approximately two days after his death. The news of his death and the cause of death have yet to be announced by the Singaporean government. His family is still in shock and demanding an answer regarding his death.

Singapore local media 8 Vision News reported on August 22 that the WeChat group "Hubei & the Lion City's Loving Heart Group" have continued to fundraise and make donations to Chinese migrant workers in Singapore⁹. The organizers of the volunteer group, Xiong Gang and Li Wenmei, said that Chinese workers in Singapore are facing three major problems. First, they may want to return home but face many challenges due to the expensive air tickets, limited flights, or their employers may not approve of them returning home. Second, they suffer from wage losses. Third, they worry about their health and lives. In addition, many workers do not know how and where to seek help when they encounter violations of their rights such as the confiscation of passports and work permits, lack of labor contracts, underpaid overtime, etc. The majority of overseas Chinese workers do not understand English. They are unable to understand letters they receive from the government. When calling for help, if the respondent speaks English, they would just give up.

The local volunteers also witnessed prejudice and discrimination in Singaporean society against foreign workers. Xiong Gang and other volunteers encountered an online trolling incident when someone posted a video verbally abusing overseas Chinese workers, telling

⁷ [Daily Situation Report on Covid-19](#), the Ministry of Health of Singapore, Sept 21, 2020.

⁸ [Measures to contain the Covid-19 outbreak in migrant worker dormitories](#), The Ministry of Health of Singapore, Dec 14, 2020.

⁹ [【暖心驿站】组爱心群组帮2000客工工程师：盼客工议题持续受关注](#) 8视界新闻, Aug 22, 2020.

them to get out of Singapore. Some Singaporeans believed that foreign migrant workers were provided with accommodation, food, wages and healthcare by the government and didn't need any assistance. But this is untrue. In reality, although Singapore's Ministry of Manpower stated that the government subsidized all employers S\$750 per month per migrant worker, employers are allowed to deduct various lodging and food costs from the full amount and only give the remaining amount to their employees. Singapore Vaster News reported on July 18 that an overseas Chinese worker said the subsidy he received was only S\$450 (approximately US\$330) for April and S\$400 (approximately US\$295) for May, and in late July, he had yet to receive his subsidy for June¹⁰. A Chinese worker who has been working in Singapore for nine years told China Labor Watch in September that he has been in quarantine from April to September, but his employer "Yangzijiang Private Limited" only gave him S\$500 (approximately US\$330) for May and S\$600 (approximately US\$440) for June.

The volunteers learned that the food provided in dorms by the government is often very unfamiliar to Chinese workers, that they had to find other ways to buy food or rely on instant ramen noodles and preserved vegetables donated by the volunteers. The workers feel marginalized, vulnerable, and frustrated. Most overseas Chinese workers are dependent on daily wages for their living and their families' living. When they lose work, they lose income. Some Chinese workers even had to ask volunteers to buy them mobile data so they could stay in touch with their families. A few Chinese workers have attempted suicide due to long term stress and isolation.

When a migrant worker is injured at work, they often have to wait for months to receive a disability compensation offer. During this period of time, their work permit is cancelled and they are placed on a special pass. A Chinese migrant worker who is paralyzed from a falling object injury at work told China Labor Watch that he was disappointed by the passive treatment in the hospital. However, he hesitated to leave Singapore to seek medical treatment in China because his injury compensation claim has not been settled. If he leaves, the Ministry of Manpower will not issue any Special Pass unless his physical presence in Singapore is necessary for the resolution of the claim. In that case, he will not be able to have the full access to justice related to his claim.

3. How the "Five-One Policy" Impacts Overseas Chinese Workers

On March 29, 2020, the Civil Aviation Administration of China implemented the so-called "Five One" policy, forcing mainland carriers to fly just one flight route a week to each country, and foreign airlines to operate just one flight a week to China¹¹. A large number of overseas Chinese residents wished to return home, and with so few flights, the price of flight tickets skyrocketed. Overseas Chinese workers are the most marginalized group compared

¹⁰ "新加坡万事通" 微信公众号, Jul 18, 2020.

¹¹ "关于疫情防控期间继续调减国际客运航班量的通知", www.chinagov.cn, Mar 26, 2020.

with individuals who study, visit families and friends, travel, or have business overseas. They are disadvantaged in many aspects. They do not have the financial means for charter flights or to pay increased air fares for those hard-to-find flight tickets from Chinese airline ticket agents or flight ticket dealers. In many cases, they cannot even make their own decision to return home. They have to accept the arrangements of the employer or subcontractor. Some workers used several months of wages to purchase high-priced air tickets.

In August, some airlines were allowed to increase the number of flights to China. However, quite a few flights were suspended as they had triggered the “circuit breaker” restrictions. The rule punishes airlines for inbound flights that have imported cases, and the punishment is contingent on the number of imported cases on the flight. If five passengers on a flight test positive, the responsible airline will have to halt operations for a week, and if ten passengers test positive it must suspend operations for four weeks.

The majority of confirmed cases of Covid-19 on international flights in August were overseas Chinese workers. This fact reflects the high rate of infection of coronavirus among overseas Chinese laborers. Once the “circuit breaker” mechanism is triggered, there are even fewer flights, making it more difficult for Chinese workers to return home. For example:

According to the official Weibo account of the Shanghai Municipal Health Commission, Shanghai reported 18 confirmed cases of imported Covid-19 cases from 0:00 to 24:00 on August 9 through the joint prevention and control mechanism at the airport. Case No.1 to No.3 are Chinese nationals, working in the United Arab Emirates, taking the same flight, departing from UAE on August 5, and arriving at Shanghai Pudong International Airport on August 6. They were quarantined and under observation after entering China, and developed symptoms during quarantine. Case No.4 to No.18 are all Chinese nationals, working in the UAE, taking the same flight, departing from the UAE on August 7 and arriving at Shanghai Pudong International Airport on the same day after transiting through Sri Lanka. After entering China, they were quarantined and under observation, developing symptoms during quarantine. Comprehensive epidemiological history, clinical symptoms, laboratory test and imaging examination results were used to diagnose all the above cases as Covid-19 cases¹².

Other examples:

According to NetEase News, on August 19, TR138 flight was the first flight of Scoot to resume from Singapore to Tianjin. However, on the first flight, there were five Covid-19 cases confirmed on August 19. According to Tianjin Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the confirmed Covid-19 cases were five Chinese men working in Singapore who arrived at Tianjin Binhai International Airport on the TR138 flight from Singapore. Four of them are construction workers and one is a company employee. In addition, seven Chinese

¹² “[上海新增18例境外输入性新冠肺炎确诊病例](#)”, Xinhua Net, Aug 10, 2020.

men were found to have asymptomatic infections of the coronavirus. They were all construction workers arriving in Tianjin on the TR138 flight. Accordingly, Scoot's Singapore-Tianjin TR138 flight was suspended for four weeks¹³.

The Singapore Eye reported on August 22 that the day before, a Juneyao Airlines direct flight from Singapore to Shanghai had triggered the "circuit breaker" punishment mechanism. There were five confirmed Covid-19 cases on the flight, all of whom were Chinese citizens working in Singapore. They departed from Singapore on August 14 and arrived at Shanghai Pudong International Airport on August 15. They developed symptoms during isolation after entering China and were diagnosed with Covid-19. In addition, on the August 14 flight MU2070 from Singapore to Xi'an, there were more than 10 Covid-19 cases, with most of the patients being asymptomatic. There were a total of 15 confirmed cases. Recently, at least 46 of the imported Covid-19 cases in China came from Singapore¹⁴.

According to the overseas Chinese living in Singapore, every person flying from Singapore to China has to provide a negative Covid-19 nucleic-acid test starting from August 28. According to the Ministry of Health of Singapore, some overseas Chinese workers who lived in migrant worker dormitories "may continue to shed viral fragments for weeks or even months after infection, which may lead to positive polymerase chain reaction test results". The Ministry of Health of Singapore believed they had recovered and no longer infectious and allowed them to board the plane. However, it is not the same as the Chinese standard, where if viral fragments are detected in the test, the individual is seen as having tested positive to Covid-19. As a result, many Chinese workers who flew from Singapore to China tested positive for Covid-19. Since more than five people on a flight were diagnosed as Covid-19 cases, the flight was suspended for a week. At the end of August, Air China was the only Chinese airline operating between Singapore and China.

4. Why Do So Few Overseas Chinese Workers Want to Speak Up?

China Labor Watch has been in touch with overseas Chinese workers since June 2020. The first-hand information we collected from the workers shows that an important reason for workers' reluctance to accept media interviews is that they fear their identity will be exposed, and they may be accused and suspected of "violating national laws and endangering the national security of the People's Republic of China". Article 14 of China's 2017 National Intelligence Law mandates that Chinese intelligence agencies "may ask relevant institutions, organizations and citizens to provide necessary support, assistance and cooperation." Overseas Chinese workers often have some connection and understanding between each

¹³ “[31省份新增确诊病例22例 均为境外输入病例](#)”, 163.com, Aug 21, 2020.

¹⁴ <https://www.yan.sg/zhifeixian15ren>

other through various WeChat chat groups, but they are also always worried that if they are honest about their thoughts, they might be reported by others.

A worker who had been stranded in Indonesia for several months said he was wary of asking too many questions about the situation of other workers in the WeChat group, and he was careful about complaining too much because he had no way to know who was reading the group chat messages. “What if someone suspects that I am dissatisfied with the Chinese government?” he said. When he finally returned to China and went through customs, he was asked by border inspectors to hand over his mobile phone to look through the WeChat app before he was allowed to leave.

In recent years, as the number of Chinese workers working overseas has continued to rise, many of the violations of their rights have been gradually disclosed by the media. However, when workers try to defend their basic rights, they are often criticized for not adhering to local laws, whilst in foreign countries, they do not receive protection as they are not citizens. For example:

In 1999, Jiangnan Daily reported that a court in Chengdu sentenced Sichuan construction worker Chen Xiangui to two years in prison for "gathering a crowd to disrupt social order", after he organized a labor union to strike while working in Kuwait¹⁵.

According to the Phoenix New Media, on April 1, 2008, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Jiang Yu stated at a regular press conference that nearly a hundred Chinese construction workers of a Dalian company in Equatorial Guinea went on strike “regardless of local laws”. The labor dispute with the subcontractor somehow turned into a confrontation between local police and the Chinese workers. The police opened fire, causing two deaths and four injuries among the Chinese workers¹⁶.

On November 26, 2012, after 171 Chinese drivers from SMRT of Singapore MTR Corporation went on strike, the Straits Times and other media reported that five Chinese drivers were sentenced to six to seven weeks in prison and 29 were deported immediately after the strike. Another 150 workers were reprimanded¹⁷.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Since the global outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, many countries have rapidly carried out large-scale evacuation and repatriation operations to help their citizens stranded overseas

¹⁵ [\[第61号\]【陈先贵聚众扰乱社会秩序案】我国公民在我国领域外犯罪如何适用我国法律追究刑事责任](#)刑事审判参考, Jan 2016.

¹⁶ “[中国海外劳工死伤事件调查](#)”, ifeng.com, Jun 23, 2008.

¹⁷ “[Singapore jails bus drivers for inciting strikes](#)”, BBC, Feb 25, 2013.

return to their country. For example, the BBC reported that India provided charter flights from May 7 to pick up about 200,000 Indian migrant workers in the UAE, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United States, the United Kingdom, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Bangladesh¹⁸. According to the Bangkok Times, as of September 4, the Thai government's repatriation operation has brought back 82,631 Thai nationals stranded abroad by the coronavirus by land, air, and sea. The government has set a quota of returnees of 600 per day, up from 200 in earlier periods¹⁹.

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, a large number of Chinese residents have been unable to return home due to travel restrictions implemented by the Chinese government. Among the Chinese stranded abroad, overseas Chinese workers are the most vulnerable and unable to speak up for themselves. We suggest that the Chinese government take the following actions to help overseas Chinese workers in urgent need:

1. Take effective supervision measures for the enterprises that hire Chinese workers in BRI to ensure that every Chinese worker overseas can keep their passport and other identification documents, and hold a legal work visa for the country where the BRI project is located.
2. Increase the number of flights back to China from countries and regions where a significant number of Chinese laborers are stranded overseas, and provide charter flights for Chinese laborers.
3. Enhance the protection of overseas Chinese laborers by opening one-stop assistance centers for workers in all Chinese embassies and consulates, setting up emergency hotlines, psychological counseling hotlines, and translation hotlines for overseas Chinese workers.
4. Accurately count and regularly disclose the current number of Chinese workers stranded overseas during the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of overseas Chinese workers infected with the novel coronavirus, and the number of Covid-related deaths.

From a long-term perspective, China Labor Watch believes that the Chinese government should set up a specialized institution to protect Chinese workers working overseas, and formulate a better anti-trafficking legal system that actively investigates and prevents human trafficking crimes. China Labor Watch also advocates for the provision of protection, assistance, aftercare, recovery and rehabilitation to human trafficking victims, including adult male workers who are forced to work within China and abroad.

¹⁸ “[India coronavirus: Massive repatriation operation begins](#)”, BBC, May 7, 2020.

¹⁹ “[Repatriation effort calls on all hands](#)”, Bangkok Times, Sep 7, 2020.

6. Appendix

Chinese workers interviewed by China Labor Watch

ID	Interview time	Labor rights abuses	Countries worked in
#1	Sep, 2020	Withholding of passport and labor contract, no access to medical care when sick	Algeria
#2	Sept, 2020	Withholding of passport, wage theft, debt bondage	Jordan
#3	Sept, 2020	Withholding of passport, restriction of movement, wage theft	Singapore
#4	Sept, 2020	Withholding of passport, restriction of movement, wage theft	Singapore
#5	Sept, 2020	Withholding of passport, restriction of movement	Singapore
#6	Sept, 2020	Withholding of passport, no pay while waiting for work-related injury settlement	Singapore
#7	Aug, 2020	Withholding of passport, wage theft	Indonesia
#8	Dec, 2020	Withholding of passport, excessive overtime	Saudi Arabia
#9	Dec, 2020	Withholding of passport, excessive overtime, wage theft	Uganda
#10	Dec, 2020	Withholding of passport, excessive overtime, wage theft	Jordan
#11	Sept, 2020	Withholding of passport, no pay while waiting for work-related injury settlement	Singapore
#12	Sept, 2020	Withholding of passport, no pay while waiting for work-related injury settlement	Singapore
#13	Sept, 2020	Withholding of passport, wage theft	Singapore
#14	Sept, 2020	Withholding of passport, restriction of movement, wage theft	Singapore
#15	Dec, 2020	Withholding of passport and labor contract, no access to medical care when injured	Indonesia

#16	Dec, 2020	Withholding of passport, wage theft	Algeria
#17	Jan, 2021	Withholding of passport, arbitrary detention	Indonesia
#18	Oct, 2020	Withholding of passport and labor contract, no access to medical care when injured	Indonesia
#19	Jan, 2021	Withholding of passport, no access to medical care when sick	Saudi Arabia
#20	Oct, 2020	Withholding of passport, wage theft, debt bondage	Algeria
#21	Feb, 2021	Withholding of passport, excessive overtime, wage theft	Serbia
#22	Apr, 2021	Withholding of passport	Pakistan