

Iran, Israel, and US War: South Asian Migrant Workers and the Need for a SAARC Response

Introduction:

“It was nothing like any sound I have heard before in my life,” said Vikrant, a 28-year-old Dubai-based Indian delivery worker, recalling the thunder of explosions when Iranian drones struck the United Arab Emirates ([Kumar, 2026](#)). Fearing for his safety, he shared only his first name. Today, Vikrant’s anxiety reflects a broader reality for millions of migrant workers across the Middle East who live and work amid rising geopolitical tensions. For many, the conflict is not only a distant political confrontation but also an immediate source of fear, uncertainty, and vulnerability, especially when far from home and dependent on their jobs for survival. The Executive Director of Equidem¹ noted that migrant workers already face structural discrimination, which becomes even more visible during crises. Security advisories or instructions to seek shelter are often issued only in English or Arabic, leaving many workers unable to understand critical safety information. At the same time, while citizens and white-collar residents can follow war updates from the safety of their homes, many migrant labourers are forced to continue working despite the risks. Delivery workers in particular face increased pressure, as more people order goods from home during the crisis ([Ajker Patrika, 2026](#)).

The ongoing tensions and conflict involving Iran, Israel, and the United States have created instability across the Middle East region, affecting around 24 million ([Berthelsen, 2026](#)) international migrant workers from different countries in the Gulf region. Approximately over 17 million are employed there from South Asia ([Malik, 2024](#)) across various sectors, including tourism, garments, construction, and domestic services. Among the civilians who died in the Middle East during the crisis, many were low-skilled migrant workers from Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan ([Ajker Patrika, 2026](#)). Bangladesh has already reported the deaths of four migrant workers and several injuries ([The Daily Star, 2026](#)), Pakistan lost two labourers and one Nepali security guard killed, indicating the direct human impact of geo-political conflict on migrant communities.

Migrant workers working in the Gulf region are already vulnerable due to a labor governance system, such as the sponsorship system named “Kefala”, which affects their legal status to their employer ([Barua, 2026](#)). During emergencies, these vulnerabilities exacerbate and expose them to severe risks, uncertainty, and limited mobility. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic previously showed how a crisis can rapidly worsen the condition of migrant workers, leaving them stranded without income, protection, and adequate access to support services ([Sage, 2025](#)).

Although there has been ongoing discussion about the immediate and long-term political and economic impacts of the war across South Asian countries, policy discussion focusing on the protection of migrant workers during emergencies receives less attention. As tensions escalate in the region, there is a growing risk that migrant workers may face increased exposure to violence, unsafe working conditions, sudden job losses, and limited access to evacuation or emergency support. These risks highlight the urgent need for stronger protection measures and coordinated regional responses to safeguard migrant workers during geopolitical crises.

¹ Human rights and labour rights organisation.

This article highlights the importance of strengthening the policies and developing collective protection measures through regional alliances like SAARC to safeguard the South Asian migrant workers during any emergencies.

Current government responses by South Asian Governments to protect migrant workers currently in the region:

Several South Asian countries have already taken initial actions to support their workers in the Middle East amid the ongoing crisis. Bangladesh's foreign ministry has confirmed that they are working to provide urgent medical care to the wounded workers. They formed a crisis response team and opened a control room, including a hotline number to monitor the welfare and safety of the workers ([The Daily Prothom Alo, 2026](#)). To manage the crisis, India has mobilized a dedicated control room, conducted large-scale evacuation returning 67,000 migrant workers from West Asia, and provided essential assistance. Indian embassies have also been coordinating to ensure safe border crossings ([The Economic Times, 2026](#)). The Government of Nepal has responded by halting the labour permits to the Middle East countries as a preventive measure to protect the workers from an insecure environment ([Asia Sentinel, 2026](#)). While these responses demonstrate important first steps, following gaps in immediate actions can be identified which hinder the protection of the migrant workers.

Key Gaps and Measures Needed

Lack of a coordinated evacuation plan and insufficient safe shelters:

Despite recurring conflicts in Middle East in last couple of years, there are no structured evacuation and contingency plans for migrant workers during emergencies. The Migrants in Countries in Crisis (MICIC) guidelines by International Organization for Migration (IOM) prioritize that governments should prepare pre-planned evacuation planning, coordination mechanisms and a proper communication system with migrants and identify their needs and capacities ([IOM, 2016](#)). Moreover, Governments and embassies should establish safe shelters and evacuation points where migrants can seek support during conflicts ([IOM, 2016](#)).

Weak communication and registration system:

Many migrant workers are not registered with their embassies or official databases, either in host or sending countries, which makes it hard to connect with them during emergencies. IOM Global Compact Thematic Paper suggests having the data about migrants to understand their needs and prepare for basic service delivery, and even the aftermath of the crisis. In addition, migrants should also understand how to obtain assistance and inform stakeholders about their needs ([IOM, 2016](#)).

Emergency protection and access to services:

Migrant workers should have access to health services and emergency assistance during a crisis ([International Labour Organization-ILO, 2021](#)). The employer's role is important in such cases; they must ensure occupational safety, access to information, and safe accommodation for migrant workers. The ILO emphasizes employer obligations regarding workers' safety, health, and protection ([IOM, 2022](#)).

SAARC as a Regional Mechanism for Migrants:

Despite the large number of migrants working abroad, SAARC has not developed a robust regional mechanism for the protection of migrants during crises. More fundamentally, the gap extends beyond emergencies: SAARC lacks a comprehensive and institutionalized framework for labour migration governance even during normal times, which further weakens its capacity to respond effectively during crises ([Barua, 2026](#)).

Migration governance is largely maintained by the bilateral agreements rather than coordinated regional mechanisms ([Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, 2025](#)). However, workers from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka often face similar risks e.g. exploitation and abuse, passport confiscation, restricted freedom of movement, discrimination, limited access to justice etc. in destination countries, specifically in the Gulf region. Researchers therefore emphasize the importance of regional coordination through SAARC among labour sending countries to protect migrants during geopolitical crises.

However, SAARC remains largely inactive, with no summit held since 2014 due to persistent political tensions, which have significantly limited its effectiveness as a regional platform for coordinated action ([Barua, 2026](#); [Drishti IAS, 2023](#)). This institutional stagnation further explains the absence of regional mechanisms for migrant protection, both in normal times and during crises.

What SAARC Could Do

Shared regional database and evacuation cooperation for migrant workers

SAARC could develop a regional migrant worker database that allows governments to identify and track their nationals during emergencies. Such a system would help embassies locate workers quickly and provide assistance during crises ([IOM, 2016](#)).

During large-scale crises, SAARC countries could coordinate evacuation flights, ships, or transit routes for migrant workers. Joint evacuation mechanisms could significantly reduce logistical costs and speed up emergency responses.

Joint diplomatic coordination with Gulf countries

SAARC countries could coordinate diplomatic negotiations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states to ensure temporary shelters, humanitarian assistance, and safe evacuation corridors for migrant workers during conflicts.

Regional migrant crisis fund

India currently operates the Indian Community Welfare Fund (ICWF) that supports overseas Indians in crisis through covering legal aid, emergency medical treatment, repatriation, and other urgent needs ([The Times of India, 2025](#)). However, at the regional level, SAARC has not established any comparable collective financial mechanism to support migrant workers. In contrast, the European Union has institutionalized regional financial solidarity through instruments such as the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), a key funding mechanism that supports migration management, integration, and emergency responses, while promoting responsibility-sharing among member states ([European Commission, 2026](#)). SAARC could establish a Regional Migrant Crisis Fund to support workers affected by conflict, disasters,

or sudden displacement. The fund could provide emergency financial assistance, repatriation support, and humanitarian relief.

Strengthening Labour Agreements with Host Countries:

South Asian labour-sending countries such as Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka rely heavily on bilateral labour agreements (BLAs) and memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with destination countries. However, researchers note that many of these agreements lack clear provisions for migrant protection during conflicts, disasters, or political crises. Future labour agreements should include wartime labour protection clauses that guarantee worker protection during armed conflict or emergencies, including evacuation support and safe shelter for migrant workers ([IOM, 2016](#)). Employers should be legally responsible for ensuring safe accommodation, access to emergency information, and safe evacuation if necessary ([ILO, 2019](#)). In addition, BLAs should establish mandatory compensation mechanisms for migrant workers who are injured or killed while employed abroad.

Pre-Departure Crisis Training:

Pre-departure orientation programs are widely recommended to prepare migrant workers for potential risks in destination countries, including emergencies, armed conflict, or natural disasters. Workers should receive training on basic safety measures during conflicts, such as sheltering, avoiding high-risk areas, and accessing reliable information that can reduce vulnerability during crises ([ILO, 2006](#)).

Migrant workers should be informed about evacuation procedures, emergency shelters, and transportation arrangements during political instability or armed conflict. Workers should know how to register with embassies, access consular support, and use digital systems that help governments track and assist migrants during emergencies.

Economic Risk Diversification:

The crisis shows a structural issue- over-dependence on Middle East labour markets. Policy should expand migration opportunities to: East Asia, Europe, and Southeast Asia.

Support for Families in destination countries:

For affected families:

- Compensation through Welfare Board
- Fast repatriation of bodies
- Education support for children
- Psychosocial assistance

Conclusion:

The Iran-Israel-US conflict underscores the vulnerability of millions of South Asian migrant workers who contribute significantly to the economies of both sending and destination countries. While individual governments have taken some immediate steps, the scale of the challenge requires stronger regional cooperation. Developing coordinated evacuation mechanisms, migrant databases, crisis funds, and

stronger labour agreements through platforms such as SAARC could significantly enhance the protection of migrant workers during geopolitical crises. Ensuring migrant safety is not only a humanitarian responsibility but also a critical element of sustainable migration governance in South Asia. However, realizing this potential will require renewed political commitment among SAARC member states, including the resumption of regular summits and a stronger focus on functional cooperation in non-political areas such as labour migration and humanitarian protection ([Barua, 2026](#)).

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