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8 July 2020

COVID-19 shifts Peru's internal migration into reverse

'The
government
keeps
extending
the
lockdown
by two
weeks. It is
impossible
to survive.'

Paula Dupraz-
Dobias

Geneva-based
journalist, also
covering Latin
America



Children playing in the Nuevo Amanecer neighbourhood, on the outskirts of Lima, in 2018. Since April, several residents have left to return to family homes after the lockdown ended their jobs. (Paula Dupraz-Dobias/TNH)

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GENEVA

After welcoming nearly 900,000 Venezuelan migrants fleeing political and economic strife in recent years, Peru is now experiencing a migrant crisis of its own. Some 200,000 Peruvians have been trying to return to their original homes from Lima, since strict lockdown measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 cut them off from their jobs.

In late April, after the first of several lockdown extensions that will now stretch till 7 September, thousands of jobless and newly homeless informal workers and their families filled the main roads out of the city. Most had moved to Lima, the capital, with the hope of bettering their lives. But now they were beginning journeys back to their former communities, sometimes thousands of kilometers away, many traveling by foot.

Some are still in limbo, delayed along the way by muddled quarantine policies and a lack of aid. For those who did make it home, the scrambled response was compounded by some communities that were unwilling to welcome returnees for fear of infection.

"All we want is to go back to our homes and our family," said Susan Chota Cora, speaking with The New Humanitarian via WhatsApp in June. She spoke from the site of the 2019 Pan American Games, in Lima, where she was in quarantine with other workers from Loreto – a region in Peru's Amazon basin accessible only by plane – who had tested positive for the virus and were not permitted to fly.

"We want to be able to work there, and stay in our place of origin," she added. "Over there we have a home that we do not have to pay for, we can live off of nature. Those are all things we cannot do here." Her group had been shuffled among various quarantine facilities since late April, she said.

Returnees like Chota Cora received only fleeting attention in national media when they began their journeys home. Their situation, however, highlights the extreme vulnerabilities of the country's army of informal workers, who find jobs in areas such as construction, domestic work, transportation, and agriculture, and represent 72 percent of the national workforce. A fifth of all Peruvians have migrated internally since birth from their place of origin.

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to internal conflict, development issues, and disasters.

How the government will assist the country's new poor as lockdown measures continue is unclear. Peru has the second-highest rate of death from COVID-19 in Latin America, after Chile, and has the second-most cases, after Brazil.

As in other Latin American countries, growing poverty and food insecurity are expected to increase. The World Food Programme projected that the socio-economic impact of the pandemic could leave around 14 million people food insecure in the region this year.

So far, Peru has decided to go big on spending, rolling out the region's biggest stimulus package, which included funds for healthcare, cash transfers, and infrastructure development, worth \$26 billion or 12 percent of GDP.

The government introduced a series of disbursements to help those who suddenly found themselves without work, but Prime Minister Vicente Zeballos said it had been difficult to identify and contact potential recipients. Incorrect addresses, no access to bank accounts, and online glitches all made communication difficult.

Miguel Barreto, Latin America regional director at the World Food Programme, told TNH that while he recognised that lockdowns may be an essential tool for saving lives, what COVID-19 has shown is "the need to invest more in reaching vulnerable people at home through social protection mechanisms", such as food rations, vouchers, or cash transfers to help people hit worst by the measures.

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Violence, and now hunger

Roger Caillahua is one of the millions of informal workers hard hit by the lockdown. In April, the economy contracted by 40 percent. Unable to work at his small sewing stand in Gamarra, Lima's normally bustling garment district – or even to recover his equipment – he is now stuck at home without income or savings.

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for all of his neighborhood's 185 families, and neighbours pool donations so everyone can eat.

"Over here, people live in extreme vulnerability," Caillahua said. "Some families are thinking of returning, even informally, to their land. They try to look for trucks that may take them. They think they could survive better than in Lima."

For him and others in Nuevo Amanecer, a former wasteland some 25 kilometers from the centre of Lima, such a return would have been unthinkable before the pandemic. The neighbourhood's residents fled the region of Ayacucho, approximately 1,000 kilometres southeast of Lima, more than 25 years ago. They left behind a conflict between the government and extremist armed forces – including fighters from the Maoist Shining Path group and the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement, or MRTA.

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That conflict left some 70,000 people dead and over 30,000 missing from 1980-2000, according to a [truth and reconciliation commission](#). Up to 600,000 Peruvians were [displaced](#) in those 20 years, mostly from poor rural communities to coastal cities. Approximately 350,000 decided to stay in their new communities after the violence subsided.

Residents of Nuevo Almanecer were permitted to occupy the area as part of a reparations deal with the government. Many of them, like Caillahua, had lost relatives who were “disappeared” in Ayacucho, very often by state forces.

In recent months, residents’ lives have been unsettled once again, as work has become impossible for many. Caillagua, who moved to Lima in 2002, said COVID-19 has also appeared in the community, after some residents violated the lockdown to search for work.

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Red tape and scrambled plans

For workers who leave, getting back to their original communities has been complicated. Those travelling overland independently must quarantine when they enter each new provincial region, often living under unsanitary conditions, said representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Peru.

At the border between Huancavelica and Ayacucho, mountainous regions southeast of Lima, some 60 people were in quarantine in large tents without access to drinking water, sanitation, blankets, or mattresses, said Francesca Scardeoni of ICRC in Peru.

"They are not informed," Scardeoni said at the end of May, speaking of people in the camp. "People were in a state of despair." The returnees asked ICRC representatives for information about protocols, she said, but aid workers were unable to help.

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"Authorities who are supposed to manage the 'retornantes' are not giving a proper answer," she explained. "It is a very difficult issue. Health conditions are really precarious. We see the conditions at the camps as a possible threat to their health and their lives."

The ICRC has delivered blankets, mattresses, and other items to quarantine centres in isolated villages in the region.

In Ayacucho, where Scardeoni heads the group's office, some 11,000 people registered with local authorities for assistance to return to their communities, she said. ICRC estimated that only 1,000 to 1,500 have been able to return via formal channels, after receiving public assistance and quarantining.

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For years, the ICRC helped families in the area search for loved ones who disappeared in the 1980-2000 conflict. It funded travel to meetings in Lima and supported forensic work. With COVID-19, that work stopped. The organisation is now providing cash support to vulnerable people who have lost their income and haven't received government funds since the start of the lockdown.

Ángel Porras Campos, with the ICRC's Ayacucho office, explained that the government agency that investigates disappeared persons had asked the ICRC to instead fund travel for people who needed help to return to their homes in the region, providing payments worth 300 soles (\$85).

"As we are now unable to help families in the search of their loved ones [due to government suspension of work], we are now substituting that with economic assistance, so that those people could somehow withstand the quarantine," Porras Campos said. "ICRC programmes that have been paralyzed by Covid have had to be re-oriented towards vulnerable families," he added.

Franklin Coriñaupa Flores was one of the luckier returnees. A suddenly jobless taxi driver, he was able to drive from Lima to his village, Huallhua, without being stopped and was quarantining in an old school. Local authorities had provided him with nothing, he told TNH via WhatsApp, and his family dropped off food, blankets, and a mat after he arrived.

Others attempting to return home from Lima have found themselves trapped in a red-tape nightmare, with physical risks added on.

In April, after applying for assistance from their regional governments, large crowds of migrant workers waited for flights for weeks outside of Lima's airport. They included Chota Cora and several hundred others originally from Loreto, in the Amazon basin region. A few boarded flights, but many others were loaded onto buses and sent to locations outside the capital to quarantine before returning home.

Fourteen days of quarantine turned into one and then two months, returnees said. They were regularly transferred to different sites, at times being told they were going to the airport when instead they were driven to another quarantine centre.

Approximately 3,000 of them ended up in Huampaní, at a "vacation centre" normally reserved for public servants, where returnees said they spent weeks without news about their transfer requests. Military police using tear gas allegedly suppressed a protest by the returnees.

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Chota Cora, a representative for the workers from Loreto – which became a COVID-19 hotspot – said people were desperate, and she accused the authorities of taking advantage of their situation. “They did whatever they wanted to with us,” she said in June. “We were tired of their lies.” She said that the first of several protests took place after returnees did not receive drinking water for one week.

Scardeoni said the ICRC requested access to the centre in May but has still not been able to visit.

The Social Defence Institute, or INDECI, which oversees the transfer of the returnees, did not respond to requests for comment.

Chota Cora said that after a month and a half in quarantine, 370 people from the Loreto group were taken to the airport. When COVID-19 tests carried out at the airport came back positive for 90 percent of the group, everyone was transferred to another site – the complex used for the Pan American Games – Chota Cora said.

The group spent another two weeks in quarantine, and families with mixed test results were placed in the same quarters as returnees who had tested positive. They finally all returned home the last week of June, Chota Cora said last week, speaking from Loreto.

A year earlier, Chota Cora and her family had moved to Lima for a “better life”. In March, her husband lost his salaried job in a plastics company and their landlord forced them to leave when they couldn't pay the rent. She tried to apply for government support online, but received automated messages denying her access to the application.

Reflecting on her experience, Chota Cora said: “We have been badly treated – psychologically, physically – and they exposed us [to the coronavirus].”

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