

Local

The other victims of COVID-19

By Chidi Emmanuel

As the health and human toll of the COVID-19 pandemic grows, so does the financial fallout. The economic consequences of the pandemic have resulted in unprecedented job losses across the globe. The repercussions of the pandemic are widespread, but Kuwait's foreign workers have been particularly impacted.

COVID-19 affected businesses and disrupted trade, which exacerbated the hardships of expats, who constitute almost two-thirds of the population of Kuwait. "Job and income losses have been particularly severe for foreign workers, triggering a substantial adverse impact on expats in Kuwait. The coronavirus has sparked one of the worst unemployment crises since the Great Depression. The crisis has increased poverty and widened inequalities with huge negative impacts," Prof N Jonathan of American International University Kuwait said.

"I was in the office when my manager informed me that my services were no longer needed. I was not angry - I don't blame anyone. I only blame COVID for destroying the economy. Actually, we were not getting customers and the employer couldn't manage it anymore. Since then, life has been very tough for me and my family," said Godwin Fernandes, who worked at a firm in Hawally.

Many businesses couldn't operate in the usual way because of the disruption caused by the pandemic. As a result, many workers lost their jobs or part of their income. Businesses that were hit the hardest include

travel agencies, hotels, schools and construction companies.

"2021 is the worst year of my life. It has never been this bad. I was stuck in Egypt for months, only to come back and get fired. The pandemic hit our company so hard, they had to sack almost 80 percent of the staff," Magidy Mohammed, an Egyptian who worked at a travel agency in Kuwait City, told Kuwait Times.

Kuwait's labor market lost an estimated 200,000 foreign workers during the 12 months from March 2020 to March 2021. The real estate sector lost the most workers at 53,000 people, followed by the wholesale, retail and auto repair sectors, which lost around 37,000 workers.

Due to the lockdown, some companies were unable to pay their employees, causing a further increase in hardship. "I haven't received any salary since the lockdown. We have been going from bad to worse. I hope they at least renew my visa, otherwise I will be forced to go home. I am sitting at home now, doing nothing. It has been difficult," said Matha, a Filipino nursery teacher.

Migrant workers in Kuwait are especially susceptible to both COVID-19 and unemployment because of the economic downturn, along with Kuwaitization and workforce nationalization policies that gained traction amid the outbreak. Foreign workers have few options against layoffs as residency permits are tied to employment, meaning that workers who lose jobs risk losing their residency.

"I am done here. I worked at Kuwait University for over 18 years and got fired a



Police detain foreign workers with expired work permits in this recent file photo.

few months ago. My visa (government visa) is not even transferable, so I will be leaving soon. Many of my colleagues also received termination letters," Sulaiman, an African resident, said in dismay.

As for Valentine and his colleagues, it is not an issue of employment anymore. "We can't even see our sponsor. We wanted to resume work after the lockdown, but the office was closed. His phone cannot be reached until now. We can't even renew our visas or find another job because our passports are with him," he said. When asked why

they haven't reported the matter to the authorities, they said they are afraid they will be jailed and deported.

On Aug 1, 2021, Kuwait started allowing legal residents to enter the country as long as they have received two doses of approved COVID vaccines, ending a seven-month entry ban. But despite the return of some expatriates with the resumption of flights, the exodus of foreign workers from Kuwait continues as a result of the economic repercussions of COVID-19 and Kuwaitization of jobs.

Hunt on for alternate routes before highway delivery ban

By Ben Garcia

A decision to ban motorbike delivery riders from almost all major roads was pushed back from Oct 3 to Nov 7 to give authorities more time to prepare an app that helps riders find suitable routes while avoiding restricted roads. The ban, which includes the First, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Ring Roads, as well as Highways 30, 40, 50, 60 and 80, comes amid a rising number of traffic accidents involving motorcycles.

Reportedly, an agreement was reached with the union of restaurants and delivery companies to install special devices on each motorcycle on the path to take. In case of any violation, a text message or automatic notification will be sent to the company from the traffic department to take legal measures.

Reaction from motorists has been mixed. Marilyn Doroja, a Filipina motorist, thanked

the government for considering the ban. "I use either the Fourth Ring Road or the Fifth Ring Road daily to commute from my home in Salmiya to my workplace in Shuwaikh. Delivery riders are a nightmare for many of us on the road. A motorbike will suddenly appear on your side or even in front of you - it's really dangerous," she said.

Kuwaiti motorist Noof, however, said she is against implementing the ban as it violates the basic rights of the delivery driver, who is a road user too. "It is a discriminatory law, and maybe our government officials must study the issue further. The riders are part of the economy and should be protected too," she said. "The government should provide them motorbike lanes so they can continue using highways, like in other countries. Even bicycle lanes must be provided. This is a more sensible way of addressing the problem. Banning them means lesser business for them and the company owners," she said.

According to Noof, delivery during the



pre-pandemic era was limited to food and some other items, but nowadays, it's available for almost all items. "If you order ice cream or something fresh for example, how will you make sure it is delivered on time to customers," she asked.

For motorbike drivers, the government decision is harsh as it directly affects not only the riders, but businesses and customers too. "Customers will have to wait

longer because we will have to look for alternative roads to reach their places. Most areas in Kuwait are connected by highways, so it's difficult to not use them," said Allan, a Filipino motorbike driver working for a well-known delivery company in Kuwait.

Delivery by motorcycle, once a rarity in Kuwait, has boomed during the pandemic, with thousands of motorcycle delivery riders on the roads now.