

Virus spike in Spain reveals plight of seasonal farm workers

July 5 2020, by Aritz Parra



Migrants who are seeking seasonal work harvest fruits stand in a square in Lleida, Spain, Thursday, July 2, 2020. Authorities in northeast Spain have ordered the lockdown of a county around the city of Lleida due to worrying outbreaks of the COVID-19 virus. Catalan regional authorities announced Saturday, July 4, 2020 that as of noon local time movement will be restricted to and from the county of El Segriá around Lleida which is home to over 200,000 people. Residents will have until 4 p.m. to enter the area. The new outbreaks are linked to agricultural workers in the rural area. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)

In the 20 years since he left his native Senegal, Biram Fall has never slept in the streets. This week, when he ran out of savings after failing to find work in northern Spain's peach orchards, he still refused to do so.

As part of an army of cheap labor that follows the ripening of different crops across the country, the 52-year-old responded in May to an urgent call for workers in Lleida, a major gateway to surrounding fertile farmland.

But migrants eager to recover from the [coronavirus](#)-induced economic freeze exceed the seasonal workers needed. Those who can't afford crammed shared apartments roam the city center endlessly, resting under porches in squares or in makeshift government shelters.

Refusing to risk contagion among them, Fall counted the few euros he had left from selling snails foraged along roadsides and packed his things. Pinching his forearm, he questioned: "Does anyone think that the virus cannot go through black skin? That it only infects white people?"

"We are being left to sleep in the streets, treated like if we were stray dogs," he added as he dragged a trolley along a highway, a plastic bag with a neatly folded duvet hanging from the other arm.

The pandemic may have slowed down in much of continental Europe, but amid dozens of infection clusters popping up across Spain, those among seasonal agricultural workers are particularly preoccupying [health authorities](#) as a possible vector for further spread.



A local worker walks along an exhibition center turned into a temporary seasonal workers' shelter in Lleida, Spain, Thursday, July 2, 2020. Authorities in northeast Spain have ordered the lockdown of a county around the city of Lleida due to worrying outbreaks of the COVID-19 virus. Catalan regional authorities announced Saturday, July 4, 2020 that as of noon local time movement will be restricted to and from the county of El Segriá around Lleida which is home to over 200,000 people. Residents will have until 4 p.m. to enter the area. The new outbreaks are linked to agricultural workers in the rural area. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)

In the town of Fraga, where fruit processing plants dot the surrounding farmland of lush orchards, 360 infections over the past two weeks have forced authorities to bring back the first localized restrictions since the country left behind a strict lockdown of nearly three months.

The nearby county around Lleida, population 200,000, has been the latest to go into lockdown, the Catalan regional authorities announced on Saturday, after infections in the province doubled in a week, from 167 to 325. As admissions to hospitals and ICUs are worryingly on the rise again, an inflatable emergency ward has been installed at the gates of a local hospital.

"We know that the [health care crisis](#) we face around Lleida has a strong social component as well," regional health chief Alba Vergés said on Saturday about the [farm workers](#) after her government locked the county down.



Migrants rest inside an exhibition center turned into temporary seasonal workers' shelter in Lleida, Spain, Thursday, July 2, 2020. Authorities in northeast Spain have ordered the lockdown of a county around the city of Lleida due to worrying

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Any uptick is being scrutinized in a country on edge after losing at least 28,300 people to COVID-19, according to official records.

At the peak of the outbreak, back in April, fearing that a shortage of workers would leave fruit rotting in the trees, agricultural unions and business associations advertised jobs that have attracted many more applicants than expected. Hail has also destroyed crops in some counties, creating what Lleida Deputy Mayor Sandra Castro calls the "perfect storm" for a "social crisis on top of the ongoing health crisis."

Two vast trade exhibition halls have been filled with temporary, equidistant beds for more than 200 workers. Temperatures are measured on arrival, those who show symptoms of COVID-19 are tested and positives go into quarantine facilities.

But Castro said her government can only do so much, especially regarding migrants with no permission to work who, according to the city's estimate, make up more than half of those who showed up despite travel restrictions.



Abu Salem, 30, from Senegal, rests on a park bench in Fraga, Huesca, Spain, Thursday, July 2, 2020. Authorities in northeast Spain have ordered the lockdown of a county around the city of Lleida due to worrying outbreaks of the COVID-19 virus. Catalan regional authorities announced Saturday, July 4, 2020 that as of noon local time movement will be restricted to and from the county of El Segriá around Lleida which is home to over 200,000 people. Residents will have until 4 p.m. to enter the area. The new outbreaks are linked to agricultural workers in the rural area. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)

"Since we condemn them to live in the shadows, they are at a high risk of having their rights violated," the city councilor said. "That's a big frustration to begin with, before we can face any other issue."

Up to 470,000 migrants could be living in Spain trying to find ways to

legally work and live in Europe, according to PorCausa, a Madrid-based foundation focused on stimulating thought around the issue of migration.

In a recent analysis, PorCausa argued that regularizing the so-called "paperless" is not only fair but makes economic sense in a country that needs younger taxpayers. The issue is highly polarizing and a vote fishing ground for the far right. Meanwhile, the ruling left-wing coalition has stayed away from following the recent examples of Portugal and Italy, only extending some temporary work permits for the summer.



A bed is illuminated by a sun ray inside a sport center turned into temporary seasonal workers' shelter in Fraga, Huesca province, Spain, Thursday, July 2, 2020. Authorities in northeast Spain have ordered the lockdown of a county around the city of Lleida due to worrying outbreaks of the COVID-19 virus. Catalan regional authorities announced Saturday, July 4, 2020 that as of noon

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In Lleida, directionless migrants are a common sight and have led to complaints from residents, especially in this virus-ravaged year. But many agribusinesses keep failing to provide enough and adequate accommodation for their workers, as required by agreements with the unions, said Gemma Casal, an activist with the local Fruit with Social Justice platform.

She also said that authorities at all levels seem to improvise their response summer after summer.

But the main problem, she added, lies within the agricultural model. Disproportionate power by large food distributors to set produce prices means "farmers end up outsourcing their labor costs to authorities who pay for shelters, aid groups or the migrants themselves," Casal said.

Ignacio Gramunt runs a private farm in Fraga that yields an annual average of 500 tons of fruit where a dozen Bulgarian workers are picking flat nectarines bound for the German market. As the head of the local fruit wholesale exchange, he is also witness to how the squeeze on prices and investors seeking large-scale cost-saving operations are driving farmers out of business.



Biram Fall, 52 year-old migrant from Senegal waits for a bus in Alcarraz, to go to the city of Lleida, Spain, Thursday, July 2, 2020. Authorities in northeast Spain have ordered the lockdown of a county around the city of Lleida due to worrying outbreaks of the COVID-19 virus. Catalan regional authorities announced Saturday, July 4, 2020 that as of noon local time movement will be restricted to and from the county of El Segriá around Lleida which is home to over 200,000 people. Residents will have until 4 p.m. to enter the area. The new outbreaks are linked to agricultural workers in the rural area. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)



Clothes belonging to migrants hang on a fence surrounding an exhibition center turned into temporary seasonal workers' shelter in Lleida, Spain, Thursday, July 2, 2020. Authorities in northeast Spain have ordered the lockdown of a county around the city of Lleida due to worrying outbreaks of the COVID-19 virus. Catalan regional authorities announced Saturday, July 4, 2020 that as of noon local time movement will be restricted to and from the county of El Segrià around Lleida which is home to over 200,000 people. Residents will have until 4 p.m. to enter the area. The new outbreaks are linked to agricultural workers in the rural area. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)



A man with his face covered with towel, sleeps in a square in Lleida, Spain, Thursday, July 2, 2020. Authorities in northeast Spain have ordered the lockdown of a county around the city of Lleida due to worrying outbreaks of the COVID-19 virus. Catalan regional authorities announced Saturday, July 4, 2020 that as of noon local time movement will be restricted to and from the county of El Segriá around Lleida which is home to over 200,000 people. Residents will have until 4 p.m. to enter the area. The new outbreaks are linked to agricultural workers in the rural area. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)



Migrants who are seeking seasonal work harvesting fruit, stand in a square in Lleida, Spain, Thursday, July 2, 2020. Authorities in northeast Spain have ordered the lockdown of a county around the city of Lleida due to worrying outbreaks of the COVID-19 virus. Catalan regional authorities announced Saturday, July 4, 2020 that as of noon local time movement will be restricted to and from the county of El Segriá around Lleida which is home to over 200,000 people. Residents will have until 4 p.m. to enter the area. The new outbreaks are linked to agricultural workers in the rural area. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)



Bulgarian migrants harvest flat nectarines, most of them destined for the German market, in Fraga, Spain, Thursday, July 2, 2020. Authorities in northeast Spain have ordered the lockdown of a county around the city of Lleida due to worrying outbreaks of the COVID-19 virus. Catalan regional authorities announced Saturday, July 4, 2020 that as of noon local time movement will be restricted to and from the county of El Segriá around Lleida which is home to over 200,000 people. Residents will have until 4 p.m. to enter the area. The new outbreaks are linked to agricultural workers in the rural area. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)



Migrants who are seeking seasonal work harvesting fruit, sleep on the ground in a square in Lleida, Spain, Thursday, July 2, 2020. Authorities in northeast Spain have ordered the lockdown of a county around the city of Lleida due to worrying outbreaks of the COVID-19 virus. Catalan regional authorities announced Saturday, July 4, 2020 that as of noon local time movement will be restricted to and from the county of El Segriá around Lleida which is home to over 200,000 people. Residents will have until 4 p.m. to enter the area. The new outbreaks are linked to agricultural workers in the rural area. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)



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Women play cards inside a house as migrants seeking seasonal work harvesting fruit stand on the street in Fraga, Spain, Thursday, July 2, 2020. Authorities in northeast Spain have ordered the lockdown of a county around the city of Lleida due to worrying outbreaks of the COVID-19 virus. Catalan regional authorities announced Saturday, July 4, 2020 that as of noon local time movement will be restricted to and from the county of El Segriá around Lleida which is home to over 200,000 people. Residents will have until 4 p.m. to enter the area. The new outbreaks are linked to agricultural workers in the rural area. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)

A net hourly pay of about 6.5 euros (\$7.30) keeps locals away from the fields across the region.

"Migrants are essential for the fruit industry," Gramunt said. But he

denies that the hiring of "paperless" migrants is widespread in the agricultural industry, a lifeline to the region. Farmers who do resort to them face fines of up to 6,000 euros for each illegal [worker](#).

Fruit with Social Justice is considering promoting an industry-wide certificate of good practices that European consumers can identify because export licenses are currently granted based largely on the paper trail of labor contracts, allowing many companies to find loopholes and take advantage of the seasonal workers.

"European consumers seem to have awakened to exploitation by the garment industry in far-flung countries," Casal said. "But here we have 21st century slavery within the EU's borders and we do nothing."

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