

## Pressure from Migrant Workers Mounting and Felt Strongly by Our Missions - Foreign Secretary, Ravinatha Aryasinha

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The Ministry of Foreign Relations (MFR) is dealing with the effects of the coronavirus pandemic both within and outside Sri Lanka. Foreign Secretary, Ravinatha Aryasinha, took time off to explain how he and others have taken up the challenge to do their best.

He told Ceylon Today that the MFR has managed its affairs and not allowed any pressure to be placed on the Government on account of the present crisis. He said, "My colleagues in the MFR, the Sri Lanka Foreign Service officers and other Public Officials deployed in the Missions from Commerce, SLAS, Defence, Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, etc., have performed their duties to the maximum extent possible within the limited resources and under trying circumstances."



**How is the MFR dealing with the ramifications of the coronavirus crisis in the country?**

A: There have been many phases of the MFR's involvement in this issue. From early January, our three Missions in China - Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou - had to deal with this before anyone understood the magnitude of the challenge. The subsequent spread of COVID-19 has today pushed our 67 Missions and Posts, which are at the frontline of the action, and also the Foreign Ministry, to points we possibly have never experienced before. The challenges have been multifaceted and can be broadly segmented into two.

Outside the country: It is the direct responsibility of the Foreign Ministry to look after the welfare of the Overseas Sri Lankans (OSLs). The biggest challenge has been to address the concerns and demands of a rather distressed OSL population wishing to return back to their motherland. As of 27 May, this figure is 42,522 from 123 countries.

This is in addition to the over-5,000 people already brought back since 21 April. Attending to the existential needs of other OSLs who have chosen to remain in their current places of domicile has also been a challenge.

Within Sri Lanka: Besides coordinating bilateral and multilateral engagements which focused on the Corona crisis, and looking into the needs of the diplomatic and expatriate community residing in and visiting Sri Lanka, the Ministry has been playing an advocacy role with regard to the repatriation process and the welfare of OSLs in consultation with President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Cabinet Memoranda, under the guidance of Minister Dinesh Gunawardena, has sought to reconcile the interests among various Government stakeholders and also at the public level, who fear that the infusion of those from outside could complicate things locally, at a time we seem to have control of the spread with no social transmission.

Another challenge has been the moderation between the varying interest groups and lobby groups urging to get back students (2,016 at present), with a relatively lesser focus on short-term visa holders out there (4,961 at present) and the rest, largely migrant workers (34,881, of which 20,893 are living in the Middle East). However, the pressure from migrant workers has been mounting and is felt strongly by our Missions who are in situ, which has necessitated the Ministry to continue to draw the attention of policymakers to their plight.

**Could you explain the type of assistance required by Overseas Sri Lankans and how the Missions were able to assist them?**

A: A large number of Sri Lankans require assistance for basic food, medicines, shelter arrangements, stretching of rent/service payment deadlines, extension of visas, settlement of issues related to short-term accommodation, assistance with educational institutes, postponements of examinations/academic sessions in case of students, etc. While Missions, together with expatriate communities, have continued to distribute food, right now, we are seeking to take advantage of upcoming flights to Male and the UAE to dispatch ready-to-eat food packs for those in Male city, best suited to those who do

not have cooking facilities in their rooms, while dispatching more dry rations to those in the UAE.

Some Missions have also helped students who faced issues in educational institutions, and those whose employment contracts have expired to secure new employment agreements, so that they are not compelled to return due to unemployment. For example, in Bahrain, where an amnesty has been declared for illegal migrants to legalise their stay, our Mission has helped our people legalise their documents and find new jobs.

Right now, we are trying to save many students who hastily returned and are on the verge of having to repeat an academic year, or have no money to go back when the term recommences. As much as we worked hard at bringing back these people, I fear increasingly that we will have to work towards restoring their status - irrespective of whether migrant worker or student. I have been from the outset very public about this, urging folks to think before they rush back home.

In addition to the above, the Missions abroad have also sourced large consignments of much-needed Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) ranging from large quantities of thermometers, test kits, nebulisers, humidifiers, ventilators, and other types of PPE protective gear.

Besides these, the collective efforts of Mission staff to lobby support through the Sri Lankan community members, associations and well-wishers overseas despite varied hardships in their countries of residence, has resulted in the Ministry being able to hand over Rs 27.7 million to President Rajapaksa on 14 May, to support the COVID-19 Health Care and Social Security Fund. The Sri Lanka Foreign Service Association (SLFSA), with its limited membership of 186 officers, also contributed Rs 2.8 million by way of personal, voluntary contributions of its members, to further support the Fund.

**What was the MFR's specific role in the repatriation of OSLs and how did you prioritise categories?**

A: To make informed decisions, we needed two things. Externally, to know how many from which category wanted to return and to assess the ground realities on the vulnerability they faced in their host countries, which was carried out by the Missions network of the MFR. Internally, we had to coordinate with the Presidential Secretariat and the COVID-19 Task Force, which matched the numbers we were seeking to bring with the availability of quarantine centres; finally, it is they who give the go-ahead as to from where the flights will be undertaken, and also determining the timelines.

Once this is indicated, we have always advocated that GOSL action must be driven to bring back those who face 'maximum vulnerability', and that vulnerability may change from time to time. Once categories were decided, starting with the initial wave of student repatriations, in selecting other persons, we have primarily gone by the sequence in which they registered their interest to return with the Missions.

Other than the Maldives, where all are equally vulnerable in Male Island, in the 15 other stations where SLBFE officers operate, in deciding on who in the migrant worker category comes, we have permitted the SLBFE Rep who is aware of their status, to give priority to those who have lost status or have been laid-off, as they are more vulnerable than others, deferring the travel of those seeking to come on holiday or living in safety.

Additionally, a few exceptions for medical emergencies have also been accommodated. This has not been without challenges, but so far it has held well, and there has been no interference. That provides a safety net for Heads of Missions to be professional and do their job.

### **The MFR launched an online portal to assist Sri Lankans. How has that helped?**

A: To help the MFR in this task, on 26 March 2020, no sooner than when the airport was closed to incoming traffic, the MFR developed the 'Contact Sri Lanka' Web Portal with the help of the ICTA. Besides helping us know of those who want to be repatriated, this Portal also serves as a virtual help desk for the benefit of OSLs.

Since its launch, 83,045 Sri Lankans have registered on the Portal and a dedicated team operating effectively 24/7, have answered 10,231 questions posed by OSLs from across the globe - mainly on assistance on repatriation and consular issues but also relating to other operational and policy matters.

The portal has been able to direct Sri Lankans to the nearest Sri Lanka Diplomatic Mission, especially where there is no Sri Lankan representation in the countries concerned. It has also helped streamline issues pertaining to the transfer of funds by migrants to Sri Lanka and to short term travellers and students from Sri Lanka.

There have been many occasions where we really did not have answers that satisfied them, but I gather from my officers working on it, that most people are appreciative that someone is willing to hold their hand and walk with them through this crisis.

**In addition to supporting people on the ground, with all data at hand, can you explain how the MFR guides the broad decision-making process in Colombo in terms of helping OSLs?**

A: The MFR intervenes in setting the course, and sometimes even ensuring course-correction. This has been done primarily through a series of 'Notes to Cabinet' by the Foreign Relations Minister. The first, tabled on 8 April, anticipated the needs of OSLs amidst COVID-19 and differentiated the categories seeking to be repatriated, urging that the students in South Asia be repatriated first while seeking funds to meet the needs of those communities in the Middle East, which at the time were less restive.

This was followed by a Cabinet Note tabled by the Ministry of Foreign Employment on 28 April, of which Minister Gunawardena holds the portfolio as well, allocating more money to help those who remain and offering SLBFE safe-houses as quarantine centres. The MFR's second Cabinet paper submitted on 6 May urged addressing the vulnerable sectors of the migrant labour category of OSLs, in the immediate aftermath of the worsening of the situation in the Maldives.

At the same time, pressure kept mounting in countries like Kuwait, where since 21 April, Sri Lankans seeking to benefit from an amnesty declared were moved into transit camps

and diplomatic pressure was being mounted to evacuate our citizens. On the other hand, in countries like the UAE, Qatar and Bangladesh, Sri Lankans were beginning to be affected and their pleas for immediate repatriation escalated.

We managed to get a flight each to the Maldives, the UAE, and Bangladesh, and subsequently to Kuwait and Qatar, to assist our citizens. The plan was to get more flights to these locations, along with flights to other countries in the Middle East, even as evacuation continued from Europe, Australia, East and South-East Asian destinations.

In a further Note to Cabinet on 20 May, while reiterating the plight of the migrant workers, we also drew attention to the need to enable those in far-flung places across the world who were on short-term visa - stranded having travelled to visit family, on business, as off-duty seamen or as tourists - to return on commercial airlines transiting through Sri Lanka.

**What effect has the fact that a large percentage of those returning from Kuwait are infected with COVID-19 had on the repatriation programme?**

A: The concerns resulting in the large number of persons returning from Kuwait being infected, and some from the UAE as well, have slowed down the process. The flight from Qatar was twice cancelled. In fact, the second time, the MFR immediately ordered that they be accommodated at Government expense, as they had nowhere to go. Luckily, the flight was restored the next day.

While always conscious of the constraints for quarantine, the Ministry has done all within its capacity to highlight the need to address the acute vulnerability faced by migrant workers, and insist that their repatriation continue alongside other categories, albeit with greater spacing between flights and sensitive to the concerns of Sri Lankans who are beginning to feel a sense of normalcy, but also vulnerability from those returning.

One has to be sensitive that these OSLs are an integral part of our citizenry and have for long years toiled amidst many odds and been an important contributor to our foreign exchange; it is our turn to assist them in their hour of need.

**As you grapple with these issues, how is the MFR helping the Government with the revival of the economic sector in facing up to its many challenges, in terms of increasing foreign exchange earnings?**

A: Our officers in the Economic Division, the territorial desks and all our Missions have been focused on this from the commencement of the crisis, in close collaboration with the EDB, Tea Board, Tourist Board, BOI and other agencies of Government, as well as the private sector, who are individually and collectively focusing on short term, medium-term and long term measures on how to brace for the impact of COVID-19.

In promoting exports, the Ministry has explored access for Sri Lankan products into new markets in 10 countries with regard to tea, spices, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as rubber gloves, face masks, reusable masks, surgical masks, surgical caps, surgical gowns and sanitary tissues, processed food, fruits and vegetables, spices and seafood. Additionally, during the past two months we have facilitated trading opportunities for Ceylon Tea from 21 countries, face masks from 25 countries, protective gowns from 15 countries, PPE from 13 countries and rubber gloves from 15 countries and growing demand for food and vegetables from 13 countries.

The Ministry is also working with exporters in expediting the process of authentication of documents and ensuring that the Colombo-based Diplomatic Missions also extended assistance for Sri Lanka to revive the economy. With Sri Lanka Tourism, we have showcased the continued presence of almost a third of the tourists who were here at the commencement of the curfew, to elevate the brand value of Sri Lanka as a safe and hospitable destination that will particularly attract high-end tourists, so that we can recover what we lose in numbers in the coming months, by attracting high-spending tourists - linked with Medical Tourism and the age care sector.



The Ministry, through its Missions network, will continue to work with line agencies to launch new efforts to rebuild the economy, attract foreign investment and increase foreign exchange earnings.

**The stepping-up of public officials - health sector workers, tri-forces and the bureaucracy - in the fight against COVID-19 has been praised everywhere. How do you explain this in the context of your officers?**

A: I am happy to note that my colleagues in the MFR, the Sri Lanka Foreign Service officers and other Public Officials deployed in the Missions from Commerce, SLAS, Defence, SLBFE, etc. have performed their duties to the maximum extent possible within the limited resources and under trying circumstances. Other than on the complex question of repatriation, I would dare say the MFR has managed its affairs and not allowed any pressure to come to the Government, on an account of the present crisis.

At present, out of the 67 Missions of Sri Lanka, almost one-third of Missions function with officers in an acting capacity from the Sri Lanka Foreign Service (SLFS), in the absence of an accredited Ambassador/High Commissioner and also a number of vacant diplomatic posts. The test of facing up to high-pressure situations, taking swift and calculated decisions, in analyzing the host country situations to identify vulnerabilities, and dealing with aggrieved communities, will no doubt enrich their sense of professionalism and sense of duty, which will hold them in good stead for the future.