

Statement on ‘Sri Lanka’s overall response to COVID-19’ by State Minister of Regional Cooperation Hon. Tharaka Balasuriya at the Vice Foreign Minister Level video conference on COVID 19 - 10th November 2020.

Introduction.

His Excellency, Luo Zhaohui, Vice Foreign Minister of China and your Excellencies.

At the outset, let me start by commending the Chinese Foreign Ministry organizing this timely meeting on a very important topic

Sri Lanka, as a developing country of 22 million people has been able to effectively to contain the spread of the virus with limited resources and limited external assistance. As at today Sri Lanka has had 36 deaths and 14,000 Covid cases. All of them are either those who arrived from abroad or have been identified as belonging to a particular cluster.

Sri Lanka’s President Gotabaya Rajapaksa early intervention led to the establishment of a Presidential Task Force for Prevention of COVID-19 in January 2020, bringing together the Health sector, Sri Lankan Armed Forces, Police and Intelligence Services, the Foreign Ministry and many other state agencies. Sri Lanka understood at the beginning that this was a challenge that all agencies of the state had to collaborate and work together on, and not a task that could be handled by the health sector alone.

A National Strategy has adopted and is being constantly reviewed by the Task Force. A National Operation Center for Prevention of COVID-19 has also been setup to implement the strategy. This national strategy contains 04 main elements;

- a. Identification of infected persons.
- b. Contact Tracing.
- c. Quarantining.
- d. Medical Treatment.

All identified patients are subjected to testing, and dedicated public hospitals have been established island-wide to treat Covid patients. Intermediate Care centers have been set up for asymptomatic Covid patients. Another aspect of our strategy is the very effective contact tracing method used by our security forces and intelligence agencies in identifying the infected persons and their contacts. Contacts of reported Covid cases are subject to home quarantine for 14 days and the Government has provided dry ration packs to these families. Sri Lankans returning from overseas are required to quarantine for 14 days at designated Quarantine Centers.

Among the multiple measure taken to prevent the spread of Covid19 includes localized lockdowns, limiting inter-district travel, and discouraging movement of individuals. In addition, steps have also been taken to introduce the ‘work from home’ concept to schools, universities and also places of work to prevent social. During the lockdowns and curfews, the Government effectively carries out home delivery of food and other essential items.

Airports have remained closed and successful arrangements have been made to bring back Sri Lankans overseas, particularly migrant workers, students, as well as sick and elderly persons. Sri Lanka has so

far repatriated over 44,000 (44,121) Sri Lankans from overseas and all of them were subjected to PCR tests and quarantine. The 67 Sri Lanka Missions abroad, in coordination with the Foreign Ministry, play a key role in registering Sri Lankans and repatriating them on priority basis.

Another pillar of Sri Lanka's COVID management is the very effective public health system throughout the country. Our public health inspectors play a key role in maintaining contact with the people at the ground level, ensuring that quarantine regulations and health guidelines are followed.

The public have also effectively contributed by cooperating with the authorities and adhering to health guidelines. Several voluntary organizations raised funds and donated much needed medical equipment and protective gear.

Challenges

Primary among the challenges that the government has to deal with is loss of employment, particularly workers in the informal sector and among low-income groups. The government is providing cost of living grants, concessionary loans, and have negotiated with banks and leasing companies to provide relief to the people. Programmes to distribute ration packs and a payment of a monthly allowance for families among low income groups have been implemented in areas under lockdown.

Sri Lankan companies including the major exporters of apparel who are affected by the disruption of the global supply chains and international shipping and air transport are also assisted by the Foreign Ministry and Sri Lanka Missions abroad by securing orders from overseas for protective gear to fight the COVID pandemic. Our companies proved their resilience and innovativeness by rapidly transforming their production to the manufacture of facial masks, PPE's and other essential protective gear. Thus, Sri Lanka can also claim that it helped to save thousands of lives worldwide by supplying protective materials at short notice worldwide. This also helped to secure the jobs of factory workers.

The Government has also provided relief measures to industries heavily affected by the pandemic, including the tourism and hospitality industry as well as Small and Medium Scale Enterprises.

International Assistance

Similar to Sri Lanka, a large number of countries have also been severely affected by the onset of the pandemic. This includes the traditional donor community that usually supports Sri Lanka at a time of crisis. Therefore, during the course of the pandemic, external financial and material support to Sri Lanka has been limited. While Sri Lanka appreciates the support received from donor countries including China, which provided equipment and medical supplies, there remains a significant shortfall in resources in the wake of a second wave.

As the world looks on in hope following positive developments regarding a potential vaccine, we now settle in what is a new normal.

However, the severe social and economic impacts of this pandemic are expected to be long lasting.

This is why, now more than ever, countries need to be partners that support each other in navigating

the unchartered waters of the post-Covid world.

In this backdrop, it is vital that countries like Sri Lanka receive assistance

- ❖ in obtaining rapid testing equipment, ventilators and sharing of experiences in diagnostics, treatment and medicine.
- ❖ Early access to a Vaccine that is affordable to developing Countries.
- ❖ Closer cooperation and sharing of experiences on border control, cross border transmission, containment measures at points of entry and emergency response.
- ❖ Assistance and sharing of experiences on economic recovery including debt relief.
and
- ❖ Cooperation to ensure smooth functioning of industrial and supply chains.

While thanking the organizers for putting together this timely meeting that opens up a dialogue between our countries, I urge that we continue with this initiative to strengthen practical cooperation in fighting this pandemic and look forward to a world free of Covid in the near future.