

The Speech Delivered by the Hon. Foreign Minister of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka at the Launch of the UN Network on Migration in Sri Lanka, 11 November 2020

Ayubowan,
Mr. Chairman,
Excellencies, Distinguished Guests

I am deeply honoured to deliver the opening address at the Launch of the Sri Lanka Chapter of the United Nations Global Network on Migration. At the outset may I take the opportunity to extend a warm appreciation to Her Excellency Madam Hanaa Singer, the UN Resident Coordinator in Sri Lanka and Mr. Sarat Dash, Chief of the International Organization for Migration for inviting me to deliver the opening address at this event.

The United Nations Global Network on Migration establishes a network on migration to ensure effective, timely and coordinated system-wide support to Member States. In carrying out its mandate, the Network would prioritize the rights and well-being of migrants and their communities of destination, origin, and transit. Most importantly, it places emphasis on those issues where a common UN system approach would add value and from which results and impact can be readily gauged.

In 2018 Sri Lanka, together with other UN Member States endorsed the Global Compact on Migration for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM). This was the first successful attempt to comprehensively capture all important elements associated with international migration. The Government of Sri Lanka indeed, believes that the launch of this network, especially at this juncture, would be a valuable resource for the country. We are confident that this would strengthen the efforts and existing work of the Government of Sri Lanka to develop its national GCM implementation.

The 270 million international migrants amount to around 3.5% of the global population. 60% of this constitutes labour migrants. There is indeed overwhelming evidence to demonstrate the significant socio-economic contributions of these labour migrants to both the countries of destination (COD) and to the countries of origin (COO).

Sri Lanka has seen a tenfold increase in migrant numbers in the last two decades, and current estimates suggest that around 1.5 million migrants work overseas, with an annual outflow of about 200,000 persons. Around 800,000 of these overseas Sri Lankans work in the Middle Eastern region.

Sri Lanka has over the years developed a good overseas employment administration system, starting with the establishment of the Bureau of Foreign Employment in 1985. Despite administrative and legal regulations, laws and services, Sri Lanka continues to face a number of challenges in the field of foreign employment. The concentration of labour migration in low skilled categories dominated by female workers with associated issues of protection, low remuneration, and the narrow range of destinations with high dependence remains a major challenge for the Government of Sri Lanka.

The Ten Year Development Plan and the National Plan of Action for Decent Work have recognized the importance of labour migration for the economy. The Plan highlights ‘safe, skilled migration’ as the basic strategy to guide overseas labour migration. The creation of a separate Ministry for foreign employment promotion in February 2007 – the Ministry for Foreign Employment Promotion & Welfare is another indication of the priority assigned to labour migration in Sri Lanka. Yet, the social costs of migration in terms of the impact on families and children left behind have been highlighted by many. Thus the delicate balance between promotion of overseas employment and protection of Sri Lankan workers abroad is a continuous challenge.

Guided by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s vision “*Vistas for Prosperity and Splendour*” Sri Lanka is committed to ensuring the livelihoods and welfare of all Sri Lankans including the migrant workers and their families. With the onset of COVID Pandemic, the Government of Sri Lanka has taken immediate measures to address the welfare needs of Sri Lanka’s migrant population. Sri Lanka has hitherto repatriated over 40,000 Sri Lankans, including 17,861 migrant workers from the Middle Eastern alone.

During the first wave of the pandemic early this year Sri Lanka, launched the ‘Contact Sri Lanka’ web portal to gather empirical data on the immediate requirements of these workers, and to guide and provide information and to assist in emergencies. We currently have over 98,000 Sri Lankans registered in this database across the Middle East, Southern Europe and to the Far East, Malaysia, Korea and Japan.

The Government of Sri Lanka also took immediate steps to release emergency funds to attend to the basic needs of vulnerable migrants, air lift dry rations to selected destinations, provide temporary shelter and accommodation and facilitate RT-PCR testing and some of our missions, for example in countries such as Jordan and Qatar have been able to negotiate the jobs or alternative employment opportunities for those who lost their employment due to COVID – 19.

I wish to express our deepest appreciation to all countries that have already taken positive steps to provide temporary relief measures to the Sri Lankan migrants during these challenging times.

In the current global setting our labour migrants are facing additional challenges which include loss of employment and reduction of earnings. Furthermore, we have witnessed a decline in the outbound travel of labour migrants by 57.2% in the first half of 2020 compared to the first half of 2019. This stands out in comparison to around 200,000 Sri Lankans who previously sought foreign employment annually.

Since COVID-19 was declared as a global pandemic by the World Health Organization, we are facing hitherto unknown and unprecedented challenges. The COVID 19 crisis has brought about a devastating impact on economies and societies. 10 years short of the ambitious 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, the impact of the COVID Pandemic has caused a serious impediment to realizing the benefits of the many important measures taken to alleviate poverty, and other sustainable development goals.

With the launch of the Migration Network in Sri Lanka, we can collectively explore and develop practical solutions to best assist and protect our migrant workers during these challenging times. It is also important that the voices of our migrants are heard and included at all stages of the initiatives.

The Government of Sri Lanka looks forward to engaging closely with the UN Network on Migration and our long-standing trusted partner, the international Organization for Migration, drawing on the knowledge and expertise that best benefits the people of Sri Lanka.

Thank you