

Statement by External Affairs Minister in Lok Sabha on Recent Developments Pertaining to the welfare abroad of Indians, NRIs and PIOs

Hon'ble Speaker Sir,

I rise to apprise this august House of recent developments pertaining to the welfare abroad of Indians, non-resident Indians (NRIs) and Persons of Indian Origin in the COVID situation. This is a subject on which many Hon'ble Members have expressed deep interest. We, in the Ministry of External Affairs, also regularly receive communications relating to individual cases and respond to the best of our ability. Such concern is natural and I take this opportunity, Hon'ble Speaker Sir, to place before the House a comprehensive picture on the global state of affairs as a result of COVID, its impact on our people and the Government's response to the challenges that have emerged.

2. Hon'ble Members would be aware that the big issue through the last year was to address the situations of difficulty and distress that many stranded Indians faced abroad. The Prime Minister directed that we undertake the Vande Bharat Mission to bring back our countrymen and women home. This was an all-of-the-Government effort, involving the Ministries of External Affairs, Civil Aviation, Home Affairs, Health, Defence and Shipping, amongst others. A total of 45,82,043 people from 98 countries have returned to India under the aegis of the Vande Bharat Mission. The vast majority came through flights, though there were also some who came by ship and across land crossings. Kerala received the maximum returnees, followed by Delhi, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. UAE was the country from where the maximum number of stranded Indians returned, followed by Saudi Arabia, USA and Qatar. 39% of the returnees were workers, 39% were professionals, 6% students, 8% visitors and 4.7% stranded tourists.

3. Hon'ble Speaker Sir, while organizing the return home, the Government also focused on ensuring that our people were provided the necessary amenities in foreign countries. This applied to those awaiting repatriation as well as those who stayed behind. It involved a vast range of activities that were coordinated by our Embassies and High Commissions. They included providing food, shelter and transportation to supplying masks, PPEs, medical support and even facilitating hospital stays. It involved intense and continuous interactions with foreign governments, pro-active and responsive measures by our

Embassy staff and close coordination with community organizations abroad. Government expended an amount of Rs. 33.5 crores from the Indian Community Welfare Fund (ICWF), whose mandate was perceptively broadened by the Government in 2017 with such contingencies in mind. I should also add that we facilitated the return from India of more than 1.1 lakh foreign passport holders to 120 countries in the same period. Many of them were PIOs and NRIs.

4. Members would appreciate that the largest repatriation exercise in the history of the world could not have happened without the goodwill and cooperation of partner governments. And if that was so forthcoming, it is because of the enormous efforts of this Government's diplomacy, starting from the Prime Minister personally. Whether it was in reaching out, invoking relationships, using our networking or engaging in direct contacts, we really went all out to ensure the welfare of our brothers and sisters abroad. And let me emphasise this: at the end of the day, the sympathetic response of others reflected their positive image of us. Indeed, this was a real testimony of India's enhanced global standing as a result of 6 years of exceptionally energetic diplomacy.

5. The focus of our efforts in the last few months has now shifted to Indians going back to their usual places of work, study and domicile. To that end, our Government has concluded air transport bubbles that are temporary reciprocal arrangements for commercial passenger services until the resumption of regular international flights. Such arrangements have been concluded with 27 nations so far. The Air India group alone has operated more than 9500 flights, taking 10.9 lakh passengers abroad. The largest numbers, not surprisingly, have gone to the Gulf. During the pandemic, our Prime Minister had declared that the Government would take care of both lives and livelihood. This guidance has been the basis for the activities of our diplomacy abroad.

6. Hon'ble Speaker Sir, just as the Government has led the way for an economic recovery at home, we are also similarly untiring in our efforts to help renew livelihoods of our people abroad. The air travel arrangements are a necessary enabling measure. But beyond that, we have been active in urging our partner governments to look sympathetically at the employment of our citizens as they chart their own recovery pathway. The Gulf has been the focal point of our endeavours, though this is a global effort on our part. In recent months, the Prime Minister has engaged the leaders of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar and Oman. Under his directions, I have traveled even during the COVID period to UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman to discuss with the governments there the welfare of our people. Because of restrictions at their end, such travel was not possible to Saudi Arabia and

Kuwait. But I have been in regular touch with their Foreign Ministers. Minister of State Shri Muraleedharan Ji, on his part, has also gone to Oman and UAE. I have also recently hosted the UAE Foreign Minister in India and expect to do so with that of Kuwait very soon.

7. During our visits to the Gulf, we have interacted with both the representative community organizations and the partner governments. From the community, the overall picture was that our people were well taken care of during the pandemic by the host authorities. From the governments, the message was of appreciation for the responsibility shown by our people amidst the pressures of the pandemic. We were told that the message of discipline and social distancing that was so strongly propagated by our leadership at home had an equally strong impact with the Indian community abroad. The support extended from India for the stay and travel of our citizens was warmly acknowledged by the community and the governments alike. The provision of medical supplies and food items from India as an exceptional gesture to the Gulf during this period clearly had a powerful resonance. So did the arrival of health professionals and medical staff, especially the dedicated medical team we sent to Kuwait. From our recent interactions, we have reason to expect that partner governments in the Gulf would be helpful in facilitating the early return of many who were compelled to go back because of the pandemic.

8. Hon'ble Speaker Sir, the Government is fully cognizant of the employment concerns that our people abroad have in the context of the COVID pandemic. Especially in the Gulf, there has been tremendous economic and social disruption that has impacted them. We have softened it somewhat but real challenges are there to be addressed. Let me assure the House that we take this as a priority. Both my MOS and I, and indeed our Ambassadors and senior officials, spend time and effort to go into these problems in the greatest of details. We have been in regular touch with most community organizations and get their feedback on both the health situation and the economic recovery. We are aware that there are problems of compensation, re-employment and re-skilling that need solutions. And these are today the core of our agenda with our partner governments.

9. The welfare of students studying abroad has also been of particular concern for all of us. Across the world, our embassies have been given instructions to reach out to them, monitor their situation and assist their return, where required. As with workers and professionals, the focus has now shifted to their going back to universities. Some countries have been more open in this regard than others, obviously reflecting their particular COVID challenge. This, therefore, remains a high priority and our endeavour

will be to encourage an early return to normalcy.

10. Seafarers have been another category requiring particular attention. We have been working with shipping companies across the world to ensure their well-being and where required, return to India. The challenges presented by crew change procedures were daunting but the flexibility shown by various stakeholders allowed us to overcome them. Members would also recall the predicament of two crews who were in particular difficulty outside Chinese ports. Their situation was also eventually resolved through great perseverance. We continue to interact with many governments to devise more friendly SOPs for crew change requirements.

11. Our fishermen have also been affected by the difficulties arising from the pandemic. We saw, in particular, serious problems faced by those who were working out of Iran. Some Gulf nations also witnessed this, perhaps to a lesser degree. Many Members expressed their anxieties at that time, and here too, the repatriation phase is over and the re-employment one has just started.

12. Hon'ble Speaker Sir, in conclusion, let me underline that from the very beginning, the Modi Government has been deeply committed to the welfare and protection of Indians abroad. And equally, we value and nurture our relationship with PIOs. The COVID pandemic was a test of our commitment on this matter, as on so many others. And whether it was the problems of the worker or the student, the professional or the tourist, we have risen to the occasion. A huge collective effort by nameless and faceless individuals from our embassies and other organizations – in India and abroad - made that possible. Like the nation at home, they too were inspired by the Prime Minister's leadership and vision. I wish to assure this august House that in the days ahead, as our quest for normalcy progresses, as the global market place and work place resume activities, as centres of study reopen the doors, we will be there - to encourage, facilitate, secure and support.

New Delhi

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