



International Dialogue on Migration – 2020
Panel 2: Protection of vulnerable migrants during and
beyond the COVID-19 crisis.
Statement by Sri Lanka
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Mr Antonio Vittorino, DG/IOM

Excellencies and Colleagues

The focus of this panel on the protection of vulnerable migrants during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic is not only timely but a present necessity. It is our hope that this discussion will lead to a better understanding of the issues, challenges and gaps in providing protection and assistance to this group, and result in stronger cooperation between Governments and other stakeholders in the development of policies, practises and networks ensuring greater assistance and protection for vulnerable migrants during the present pandemic and beyond.

Migrant workers comprise 3.5% of the world's population and are a crucial part of the global workforce. The contribution of migrant workers to economic growth and development has become critical not only for the countries of origin, but also for upward socioeconomic mobility in the region and internationally.

The COVID 19 crisis has brought about an unprecedented impact on economies and societies. This in turn has disproportionately affected the most vulnerable segments of the societies and communities, in particular, the migrants. They are at the risk of being left behind, in the countries both developed and developing despite all the preventive and recovery efforts. Since the COVID 19 crisis emerged, we have witnessed the misery and plight of the millions of the vulnerable migrants, some of whom are facing the risk of falling victim to human trafficking and forced returns. Pre-existing encountered by migrant women have been exacerbated, making them further vulnerable to harassment and exploitation.

The magnitude of the crisis and its cascading impact on the migrants, irrespective of their migration status, calls for international responses through firm cooperative measures. It is our duty to care for these migrants who make an enormous contribution to the economies and societies, whether in countries of origin, destination and transit. A comprehensive cross sectoral approach by Governments, international humanitarian organizations, the private sector, including recruitment agencies and employers, and the civil society is needed in providing both practical and sustained solutions. In our collective efforts, we must be guided by the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration as well as the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

The recent initiative of the International Chamber of Commerce and IOM to release employer guidelines for measures to protect migrants during COVID-19 dealing with five categories of physical and mental health, living and working conditions, economic support, ethical recruitment and supply chain transparency is timely and we are hopeful that these guidelines will be implemented by employers.

Mr. Chair, distinguish panellists,

While the COVID-19 pandemic was evolving, approximately 1.5 million migrant workers from Sri Lanka were overseas. Out of this total, about 800,000 are in the Middle East region, which serves as the main destination for Sri Lankan migrant workers. 80% of those who are serving in the Middle East are domestic care providers, with low or semi-skills, and majority of them are women who are particularly vulnerable.

The Government of Sri Lanka accorded high priority towards addressing the immediate concerns of these vulnerable migrant workers during this period, including:

- Creation of a web portal 'Contact Sri Lanka' to gather empirical data on the immediate requirements of these workers, and to guide and provide information and to assist in emergencies. Over 17,000 questions posed by Overseas Sri Lankans (OSLs) were answered by a dedicated team, ensuring the wellbeing of the migrant workers spread over 120 countries.
- Release of emergency funds to attend to the basic needs of vulnerable migrants
- Air lifting of dry rations to selected destinations
- Providing temporary shelter and accommodation
- Negotiation of alternative employment opportunities for those who lost their employment due to COVID – 19,
- Facilitating RT-PCR testing

Furthermore, a sizeable number of migrant workers either voluntarily or for other compelling reasons such as loss of employment, and issues related to wages and health during the Pandemic period have expressed their interest to return to Sri Lanka.

As of date, 27, 802 migrant workers have been repatriated, which accounts to 64% of total repatriations since March 2020. Sri Lanka has sent at least one repatriation flight to almost all the destinations which have a large migrant worker presence, with multiple flights to Male, Dubai, Qatar, Dhaka, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Oman and South Korea

While another 40,152 of migrants (3308 dependents) have expressed their interest to return to Sri Lanka, the Government is compelled to make the difficult decision of phasing out repatriations due to limitations with regard to capacities at local quarantine facilities, national health infrastructure and the number of healthcare professionals and also taking into consideration the local COVID-19 transmission situation.

Mr. Chair, distinguish panellists,

With its own experience, Sri Lanka wishes to bring the attention of this august gathering to the following priority areas in relation to protection of vulnerable migrants during this Pandemic and beyond:

1. **Health of migrant workers as an integral part of national health responses plans:**

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to ensure that migrant health is adequately addressed and that the health needs of migrants are integrated into national plans, policies and strategies across sectors, responding to the call to 'leave no one behind' and achieve Universal Health Coverage (UHC), as stated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. We urge countries to ensure that migrant workers are provided with access to healthcare facilities, regardless of their migration status, including by providing access to information and testing.

Sri Lanka will continue its commitment towards migrant health, and has provided healthcare facilities to all, including migrants regardless of their migration status. In the long run, cooperation between States, as per the International Health Regulations (IHRs) on health checks and screening of migrants prior to repatriation can contribute significantly in controlling outbreaks of disease.

2. **Facilitate temporary relief measures and amnesties:** It is evident that most vulnerable among the migrant workers during this pandemic are those who are undocumented and irregular relying on daily paid jobs. Taking into account the unprecedented circumstances this Pandemic has created, we encourage governments to provide relief measures, such as granting amnesties, regularising of visas and waiver of penalties and fines etc. Sri Lanka wishes to express its appreciation to Governments that have already taken positive steps to this end.

3. **Provide redress for migrant workers:** The pandemic, coupled with other existing circumstances such as migration status make the migrant workers to face additional challenges, such as loss of documentation and non-payment of wages and benefits. We encourage Governments and Private agencies to provide redress, ensure payment of due wages, compensations and entitlements for such migrant workers.

4. **Strengthen inter-agency coordination at national, regional and international efforts:** The Pandemic has once again underscored the need for close coordination among national and international partners, in executing effective responses. We encourage the IOM, WHO and ILO as well as the

regional consultation process such as the Colombo Process, the Abu Dhabi Dialogue, the Bali Process to work in close coordination in responding to the immediate and long –term challenges associated with labour migration, amidst the COVID – 19 pandemic.

5. **Sustainable solutions for up-skilling and re-migration:** migrant workers (both regular and irregular migratory statues) who have opted to return to countries of origin will require immediate, medium and long –term interventions to recover from the socio-economic impact of COVID 19 crisis. Priority should be accorded to livelihood options, with possible opportunities for re-migration.

We encourage the Governments to cooperate and assist each other in facilitating national measures for up-skilling and skills recognition. We also request the Governments to facilitate the re-employment of the migrants where the economies have started to pick up, ensure decent work conditions, social protection and accommodation and prevent exploitation by unscrupulous elements.

Mr. Chair, distinguish panellists,

I take this opportunity to thank the International Organisations, in particular the IOM for their assistance in both national COVID- 19 prevention measures and assistance to migrant workers. We will continue to count on the IOM in addressing the concerns of migrants as we pass through these challenging times.

Labour strategies that take the above factors into account and contribute to long term post crisis recovery are required together with development-oriented migration policies keeping in view the contribution migrants can make towards economic regeneration and growth.

The far reaching effects of the pandemic have highlighted the critical need to re-evaluate migration and mobility policies, while broadening the focus from humanitarian assistance to social and economic re-integration, in order to maintain the trajectory towards achieving the SDGs.

As a country of origin for over one million migrant workers, Sri Lanka remains committed to address the root causes that can lead the migrant workers into vulnerable situations, including being victim to human trafficking. We appreciate the cooperation and assistance extended towards these efforts by bilateral and international partners. At the same time, we wish to note that any mechanism to assess the commitment of a given country, without taking into account the specific circumstances and challenges it is confronted with, is not constructive.

Thank you.