

Transcript of Foreign Secretary Ravinatha Aryasinha's interview with Indeewari Amuwatte on 'Hyde Park' on Ada Derana 24 on 4th April 2020 (Pl. note that some comments have been re-clustered under relevant headings)

INITIAL CHALLENGE IN HANDLING COVID-19 OUTBREAK IN CHINA

IA: As Sri Lanka combats to eliminate the health crisis of the COVID 19 pandemic along with the rest of the countries across the globe, we thought of speaking to Foreign Secretary of Sri Lanka whose Missions across the countries of the world have been in the forefront of dealing with expatriate issues. A warm welcome to you Ambassador Ravinatha Aryasinha Sri Lanka's Foreign Secretary who was formerly Sri Lanka's Permanent Representative to the United Nations. Foreign Secretary, let's start off talking about the work of the Sri Lankan Missions overseas since the start of this crisis. The Foreign Ministry had to be at the epicenter of where the virus began - Wuhan, and the influx of concerns of Sri Lankans citizens there. Since then we have come a long way from evacuation of 30 students to setting up 'Contact Sri Lanka'. What is the latest update that you can share with us?

SFR: There have been many phases of the Foreign Ministry's involvement in this issue. Our three Missions in China, had to deal with something which we did not know the length and breadth of and how it manifested itself. We were all dealing with a problem which we didn't even understand. In fact, I last week asked my colleagues in China - the Actg. Ambassador in Beijing and Consul Generals in Shanghai and Guangzhou to write a list of 'dos and don'ts' - what you tell people when they come to you, how you give hope, how you help - and I circulated it to all our Missions and to all my staff, because I think that those three guys and their staff behind them, were true heroes of dealing with overseas Sri Lankans. That's part of the Foreign Mission's routine mandate, but I think that the magnitude and the scale of this operation has pushed us to points which we have never experienced before. Certain aspects we have experienced in regions, but this we are experiencing simultaneously across the globe today.

So from getting students from Wuhan by a Charter Flight – and that is the only Charter Flight which has been flown especially to do this so far, to facilitating others from China to return, to repatriating a large number of pilgrims who were in India through Commercial Flights - no charter Flights were used in India - to then dealing with each pocket of development in the various countries, our Missions have been in the forefront.

Our Missions have had to do two set of things, one has primarily been dealing with an immediate problem, two to anticipate where this could go. Because I don't think any of us quite know.

CHALLENGES FACED BY MISSIONS ABROAD IN OTHER REGIONS

IA: It has moved to Europe now.

SFR: Exactly. We have to be ready to face it wherever it is, and our Missions spread across the globe are on the frontline of this action. My job through our bureaucracy and under our Hon. Minister and the directives of the President, Prime Minister and the Government, is to prepare our Missions to deal with this. I am sure that as much as we say so, there is never enough preparation, and all we can do is to have a good check on things.

Over the last two days we had tele-conferences with all our Missions in five groups because the requirements in each place are different. In South Asia the focus is largely on students, with some people working in factories and Sri Lankans exporters in Bangladesh being a particular pocket. Middle East is a whole other ball game - because there you have more than million or even 1.5 million of Sri Lankan expatriate working force. Some are in houses, some are outside, some are registered with the Foreign Employment Bureau, some are not. So you have lots of issues which are not just Corona related, but are fundamentally vulnerabilities of a Sri Lankan who is not so well to do, who is dependent on an home employer or a factory out there. Then when you go to countries like Malaysia, you find both - about hundreds of students, but also 20,000 workers as well. Then you can talk about Australia and the western countries where there are large student populations and others, who are holding Sri Lankan citizenship.

'CONTACT SRI LANKA' WEB PORTAL

It is to take stock of this totality that we launched a web portal. Because while we have data collected already – our estimate right now is that we have about 2.6 million Sri Lankans abroad – we need to be clearer on this and have some hard data to be available, particularly in this context, and to be of assistance to these communities.

IA: Contact Sri Lanka the online web portal was launched on 26th of March. To date is has 45,770 Sri Lankans living abroad registered on this portal and I think we need to invite more and more Sri Lankans living overseas to register on this web portal because this is for the Foreign Ministry to be in touch with our Sri Lankans living overseas.

As you know Contact Sri Lanka is a joint exercise we did with ICTA and we have very good cooperation and collaboration that was put up in less than a week. For example, at 12.53 on that site somebody has said that they were having a problem with their stipend somewhere in Southern India, Bangalore. It reached me by about 2.30. I put it to my Actg. High Commissioner in New Delhi by 3.30, and by 6.00 clock we had fixed the problem, and he had contacted the Foreign Office which was dealing with the stipend issue and there was an understanding that the stipends will be paid a little in advance and this problem was sorted. Yesterday, there was a problem of somebody stuck on the border trying to cross from Thailand to Laos. Within a few hours we were able to get them to talk to our Ambassador in Thailand and who is also concurrently accredited to Laos and we were able to get that sorted.

IA: Lot of resources put together to address the concerns of the Sri Lankans.

CONCERNS OVER HOST COUNTRY POLICIES

IA: As more and more Sri Lankans overseas are wondering when they can return to Sri Lanka amid this global pandemic, cities and countries across the world put all their resources to combat this health crisis in the form of COVID 19, the Foreign Ministry of Sri Lanka issued a statement very recently requesting all Sri Lankan expatriates to remain in the current locations until the risk of COVID 19 is minimized and also Foreign Secretary, you assured that request for return to Sri Lanka will be considered once the spread of the virus is contained in the country. This was one of your very latest media releases. But in a turn of events, Prime Minister of Australia yesterday at a press briefing announced that it is time for temporary visa holders to make their way back home. He said if they are not in a position to support themselves, then there is the alternative for them to return to their home countries. Something very strong I see is that as much as it is lovely to have visitors to Australia in good times at times like this, if you are visitor in this country, it is time as it has been for some while and I know that many visitors have to make their way back home. Have you tried to speak to the High Commission here and your Mission abroad in Australia? What does this mean? This affect many Sri Lankan in Australia. Who are these temporary visa holders they are referring to?

SFR: Frankly I was taken aback when I heard that comment. We are a country who had over 30,000 tourists two or three weeks ago when we closed or limited arrivals. Half of them are still in this country and we are looking after them. Many of them are staying in this country because they feel that we will handle this in some systematic way. Also, it is a sentiment of confidence to our tourist industry that we not only look after ourselves but we look after our visitors through thick and thin. There were some points where I think some concerns and that was very immediately dealt with by both the political leadership as well as the bureaus which are dealing with tourism.

It is in that context that this was a little surprising. But before I came here, I spoke to David Holly, High Commissioner for Australia, and he has re-assured that this was not, and I repeat, **not** meant for students. The idea in the Australian comments was essentially about visitors, which was tourists, and what they were trying to say is that they were encouraging those who were there on short term visas to get back home. That is each country's decision.

IA: Foreign Secretary, Sri Lanka being a small nation, you are intervening in negotiations with other missions in other countries through the Sri Lankan Missions to extend visas of Sri Lankans who are in other countries on temporary visas. At the same time these countries, you would be reaching out to Australia I presume. But a statement like this because this is a global pandemic and we have shut our Airports down. Is it ethical for a nation to request nationals of other countries to leave? Because yes at good times you have the Foreign exchange coming in but at bad times too you have to stick together?

SFR: It is above my pay scale to answer that question. But all I can say is I think that different countries have to deal with it in different ways. We have about 12,000 Sri Lankan students living in Australia and I understand they have 586,000 foreign students altogether, that is more than a million from all over the world in Australia. Students are a big industry to the Universities and the Australian economy, so I was rather surprised by this comment as I said.

I think we have to leave each country to decide on how they deal with this problem in a manner which is reasonable, which does not unduly inconvenience people. Sri Lanka did not do it in a negotiated way - we were one of the earliest countries to extend visas of all those who are in this country, foreign visitors or any category of visa holders till the 15th of April and then last week we extended it to the 12th of May. But I emphasize, I think we must leave each country to make their call, and many countries as I know have responded to our appeal, people who out their on-visit visas have been told to contact the nearest visa Post. Our Embassies are working with those Foreign Ministries and making that information known to Sri Lankan citizens abroad.

IA: But if Australia does not change their stance on this and they request and encourage visitors to travel home, what will be the measures taken by the Foreign Ministry, especially we have a large number of Sri Lankan visitors there too on temporary visa. What will we do?

SFR: I think we have to really look at the numbers and movements. The Australians will have to tell us that, because they are the ones who have issued the visas for them to go. There must be many parents visiting children and children visiting parents - Whether they come under this categorization of those "who don't have means". So there might be some room there. I guess this really applies to somebody who is on a very short visa, short visit. Let us discuss with the Australians. I am sure that there are certain norms and processes, but I can very firmly assure you that this does not apply to students - which I think was the scare this morning when we heard about it. I think parents with children out, are in any case very concerned for the last two weeks.

SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS AND OVERSEAS SRI LANKANS

SFR: There have been many parents who have spoken to me, and I personally try to spend time whenever I am being spoken to directly, because I understand the worry of the parents. We would all love, particularly in a situation like this, to have our kids with us. But when you face crisis like these, you have to balance interests and try to safeguard everybody. Maybe children who are sitting in a hostel out there are safer sitting there, than actually trying to scramble back, even if the airport was opened and even if the flights were there. Trying to come through international airports and public transport at this time, could unnecessarily expose you to Covid-19. We saw that latest story of how that one gentleman got the disease, that he was caught in the midst of those who came from Italy. All of us today are sitting here quite well and who knows what will happen tomorrow? In our culture, we are attuned to understanding that reality. But governments have to try to find solutions in a whole of Government sense, taking competing interests in to account, and eventually prioritizing.

IA: Sri Lankan students for instance, you say that number of them are and it is better for them to remain there until this situation is under control. But what is their food and sanitation and other requirements. At what level are you connect to them? Yes, through the Missions but there may be those who are not reachable at this time because the Universities are under locked down or certain countries shut down and emergency services in place. Let's talk a little bit about the challenges that Foreign Ministry face.

SFR: That depends from country to country and also the cultures of those countries. Now my sense is that pretty much in South Asia and probably South East Asia as well, that we have a pretty good idea of students, and by and large their basics are met. But there must be many anxious parents watching this. I am sure that children are anxious too. I don't know whether children are more anxious or parents are more anxious. Probably parents are more anxious than the children. And I think you reinforce that anxiety on each other. That should be avoided. We must all remain strong, in order to survive this.

My advice to my colleagues, is don't give expectations you can't fulfill. It's much better to be sensitive to concerns, and try to respond to real issues, rather than just to please, giving people false hope at a time like this. Now just this simple announcement clarifying what the situation on the ground was, and the reluctant but definite decision the government took that to not bring back folks, I think that calmed things down to some extent. Our Missions which earlier had to be on the one hand answering questions "why aren't you sending our kids back" or "why aren't you sending the workers back", which was beyond us, have now to deal with a more direct problem - which is "how do you look after them where they are". I think that clarifies matters. I am satisfied of the efforts of most of our Missions - again not all in the same way because there the resources are different, the circumstances are different. These are not problems you can resolve by waving a magic wand, but we are better prepared to do that.

At the same time Sri Lankan citizens abroad, while naturally being anxious, must know that if there is a real calamity, the Government of Sri Lanka will step in. They must have that confidence. Now at this point we feel that this is the right decision. Down the road things can change. With that confidence I think we will succeed to the extent that each of us, as far as we can, go about our business, more carefully and more protected.

The parents here in Sri Lanka, should rest a little bit more comfortably about their children, knowing that the Embassy is a phone call away and that if there are any issues on the ground, that our Missions abroad will deal with it. This is not a Foreign Affairs issue alone. This is a national issue. We are good at dealing with difficult issues.

IA: Sri Lanka rushed to bring students as I mentioned at the beginning to bring back student from Wuhan and pilgrims as well as other students across the world where the need arose.

ECONOMIC PREPAREDNESS

IA: *Moving away from the present challenges, to look at the future. Looking ahead, Sri Lanka and the rest of the world can't be stuck in fighting this pandemic, but exports where there is foreign exchange coming in, we have certain challenges in the ongoing situation. In the economic front, through you Missions with the Export Development Board, you will be facilitating exporters during this volatile period. But imports, we have banned imports of non-essential items oil and other essential goods are permitted. We are looking at exports, we are looking at manufacturing status in Sri Lanka, improving exports so that we can earn foreign exchange to facilitate those essential imports to the country but what is the challenge at the moment that you are facing?*

SFR: I think that is a very serious question because, as we deal with today, we have to think of the day after. I think countries which are going to succeed in coming out of this are those which are able to do both. I think it is equally important. In the Foreign Ministry our officers who are handling the Economic Division are focused essentially at this point, in trying to get together with the EDB, Tourist Board, BOI and other agencies on precisely this aspect.

Tea is a classic example. This is a point where Sri Lanka's tea might get a good market, because tea is seen as a good beverage in these times. One problem was that the tea auctions had stalled so exporting became difficult, but I am very happy that today we have electronically started the tea auctions. I think this is a good step. Now in Turkey I understand there is already some opportunity to increase our market. Similarly, it would help if we can push the kinds of products on which we have a niche, which we have the production lines going on. Because one good thing which Sri Lanka has done is, while we have shut down a lot, tea estates I understand are working; agricultural production side is still working. So, if we can keep those going at least we can ensure the supply.

The demand side of course is another matter. Countries are compressing their orders because they are not quite sure when the Walmart is going to be open again. So that is the buyer. But I think both sides have to work. What we in Sri Lanka can do, is to try to make sure that our traditional supply lines are doing well.

Interestingly, some new products have also emerged from this, like protective gear. Apparently, we are manufacturing that now. We are manufacturing it for ourselves and there are some countries which are asking for samples. And we have already provided some samples of it. So, the niche we have in the garment manufacturing, if we can convert into this type of product as well, in future it will give us some openings. And I think we have to do that, because countries like Vietnam are doing it very well in these circumstances. So, if we are to stay ahead of that curve, while we are on the one hand fighting to keep the disease down, those who are in the productive sectors have to also keep the exports going.

Similarly, on tourism, as I told earlier the 15,000 who are continuing here will be the biggest advertisement Sri Lanka can provide to tourism in the future. I recently saw that guy who talked on BBC after visiting Sri Lanka a couple of days ago. That was an advertisement which money couldn't pay for. How Sri Lanka takes care of them all, and how Sri Lanka is handling things themselves. So that gives a certain confidence to audiences out there.

Therefore, on the economic front we are at early stages, but we have to get the niche industries working. This is a thought which must percolate right down to the worker in a factory. He or she is not only working for one's self, but they also are keeping the clock going in terms of production and manufacture. If factories close down, those who are on daily wages and irregular employment will lose their work, and create further complications for themselves, exports and the country.

IA: I like to go back to economic activity. As this is not your normal line of work but the Foreign Ministry is very important at this juncture. Looking ahead, post pandemic situation right now Sri Lanka needs to be figuring out a way forward, and economic blue print to find out how we address the country's need as a self-sustained Nation when we can't import we have to look at manufacturing and you spoke of the areas where Sri Lanka has already ventured into and how tea might be the solution to Sri Lanka's economic woes at the moment. But specifically, what are the Missions doing right now to speak to these Nations because given these situations there might be other requirements for Sri Lanka to cater to, because we have the work force.

SFR: Some income drop is going to happen. We have to be realistic about it.

IA: Let's talk about economic zones too. What sort of a role will they play if we revive these economic zones?

SFR: I think it is important that we do that, as these are all signals to the outside world of our resilience. I don't think in Vietnam they shut down any economic zones. May be economic zones are not right in the center of everything, and therefore, it probably is easier. If you are out there in a zone, you continue to work so long as you have your food and your space and all that.

So, I think these circumstances bring to all of us choices. In normal life if we can do everything and anything we want, when we have a little less money or a little less freedom due to something like this, we start adjusting to what we have. So may be in industry, we also must identify some target industries, which need to keep going to meet the demand. Demand side is equally problematic. You can produce all the garments you want, if there is nobody to buy them, what do you do? I think you got to be on your toes and one thing our Missions are right now doing and we have asked them to, is to see what are the exports which are going to continue, what might be the ones in danger. Understanding that dichotomy is important for us and what the ones which might be futuristic because that's the supply line we have to work. There is also a problem about backward linkages. You can't make garments without having the raw material and fittings, and the supply lines disrupted, as you might call it now. But

I understand now from China, cargo is coming, so that the backward linkages are being restored to a large extent. I think we got to just focus on a few things and do them well. We must also have confidence in each other. If we each do our job, we will pull through this together. One must not try to do the other person's job. If you do your job right, then I believe that society as a whole will be able to get through this. It's a difficult patch we have been there before, and I am sure we will come out of this as well.

BILATERAL MUTUAL ASSISTANCE

IA: In this fight against COVID-19 there is a requirement of immediate medical supplier. How is your team working coordinating with other countries in order to have Sri Lanka access to medical equipment, especially also drugs that we require?

SFR: I think this is something from day-1 that has been done through the Missions. The general process is that the Health Department would tell us they want something, and once we have their sanction, we would leverage with the relevant country and their authorities. Some are very commercial transactions which are easy to do, some involve government. Sometimes priority has to be given in some countries. It is to the credit of all our Missions where this sourcing has been taking place, that we have been able to get stuff and get them on the next flight as you have seen things regularly coming in. We also have to be very careful because we must not get stuff which is not essential at this point, with the drugs which are coming in and all there are lot of people trying to sell their wares. But we must have some control and so we are not trying to get anything even if given free, which is not sanctioned and not authorized by the Health authorities, because they have to be the captain in telling us whether this is to be brought or not to be brought, because it comes from both sides. There are new products as well, but our Ambassadors are on the ball on that and they are keeping us abreast of new developments, particularly the test kits. It's a big debate on how fast the test is, but we are allowing Health to lead and tell us what they want and we will do what they want. That's what how it's going, and the COVID control operation is working with us on this from time to time. So, there is a good check and balance on how we are procuring material and medicines for them.

In terms of international assistance, we talk about the SAARC Fund, we talk about your Ministry and your Missions being in contact with Missions overseas who are in touch with them respective countries and foreign ministries and also China sending assistance. If we look at the larger picture here how far are, we in calling for assistance and accepting these. Especially, when most of these bigger Nations are also facing and are crippled in the face of this pandemic.

SFR: I think we are taking and we are giving as well. In the SAARC Fund, we are putting down 5 million dollars, which all the SAARC countries can draw on - that's giving. There is a stock of tea on the way to UK to be given to the NHS, which could do with a cup of tea at this point when they are under a lot of pressure. And I think we are trying to be generous and helpful in places we can.

We are at the same time receiving a lot of assistance as you can see the World Bank and IMF made some provisions available to us. We also know that we are receiving assistance both from government sources as well as non-governmental sources. Sri Lankan communities out there are very worried about themselves, but in true Sri Lankan spirit these are the very people who also collecting stuff to be sent to Sri Lanka. Yesterday, we had to in fact try to encourage some of them whether it is not more practical to send in money to the COVID-10 Presidential Fund, or to send material stuff which we have to freight and might take a little longer with all the cargo restrictions/ flight restrictions. These are all choices which we are making.

But besides these material stuff, there are also processual help we need. Back again to the Middle-East, where I really believe that we must be very conscious because that is where our biggest issue is, given that it is the largest overseas Sri Lankan population and a population which has funded a lot of tax payers giving a lot to this country through foreign exchange. This is an occasion where they must not feel that we are not standing by them enough, and it is important that we stay with them.

IA: What can we do?

SFR: We are talking to organizations like the IOM and organizations like CARITAS to try and help some of these people who are out of jobs. Some of them are illegal as I said. So, we have to find ways and means. In fact, today I told someone in IOM, treat this as equal to the situation during the Gulf War. If this is a war, then you can't sit back and say no, this is not in the book. We have to find ways of getting rules for these things on our own at some point.

For now, where people are stuck in an airport and couldn't come as airports were suddenly shut down, we have to look after those people, ahead of people who were on holiday, are with family and possibly have means, as we don't have the capacity at this point to do all. Yes, we can share a meal but we have to anticipate that if this goes longer, there might be people out of jobs, there might be people who are citizens of Sri Lanka whose responsibility lies squarely and surely on Sri Lanka's shoulders. And if they are not going to be welcomed in those countries, then we have to deal with that. We have to be prepared for that.

OVERSEAS SRI LANKAN COMMUNITY SUPPORT

IA: Communities, Sri Lankan Nationals overseas can now play a bigger role than they usually do in helping Sri Lanka, in mitigating effects of COVID-19, so how can we bring them together in this fight. How do we interface with the rest of the world? What is the way forward?

SFR: I think right now there is a little bit of juggle between worrying for oneself and worrying about a larger cause. But as we all know, one way to deal with worrying about oneself, is to look at the larger cause. And I think in many places as I said there have been collections being made, equipment being procured. Ventilators for instance, yesterday in New York they were trying to send some ventilators to Sri Lanka and we wanted to match what they were trying to send and

the system for the Health authorities. Today we were told it is OK. So it will be sent on the next flight. So, they are doing it and I think all we have to do is to encourage them to do more. I would say sending funds at this time where transfers might be the quicker and easier thing to do. Similarly, we are also requesting friendly governments who might be inclined to help, to give us some financial support to get through this and also to give us some financial redress in rescheduling some of the loan payments. So all these exercises are happening.

So my sense is that time will tell how successful we are, but right now, what the Foreign Ministry can do, is to deal with the present situation, to anticipate and prepare for any difficulties ahead, and further map out what we do the day after this problem is solved, particularly on the economic front.

IA: Thank you very much. I would like to remind our viewers of something you said - that the Government will step in where necessary, but for our very own overseas Sri Lankans stay where you are, remain at your current locations and stay safe.