

Over 17,457 Overseas Sri Lankans (OSL) had by Saturday noon (28 March), registered on the 'Contact Sri Lanka' Online Portal of the Ministry of Foreign Relations. Of these, 6773 are from the Middle East region, 1892 from Europe, 1302 from South Asia, 1028 from North America and over 6000 from other parts of the world.

This portal jointly created by the Ministry of Foreign Relations and the Information & Communication Technology Agency of Sri Lanka (ICTA) for the benefit of Overseas Sri Lankans, was launched on Thursday (26 March 2020). It is hosted on the Ministry web page www.mfa.gov.lk and can also be accessed at www.contactsrilanka.mfa.gov.lk. A dedicated team of officials have been assigned by the Ministry of Foreign Relations to respond to queries.

A bulk of the 700 inquiries received through 'Contact Sri Lanka' so far, relate to the possibility of return to the country. However in light of the special request made by the Government yesterday (27 March) to Sri Lankan expatriates urging them to safely remain where they are now until the risk of COVID-19 virus is minimized and the disease is contained in Sri Lanka, the Ministry has taken several measures through its Mission network to continue to facilitate and address the immediate concerns of the Overseas Sri Lankans. Other common inquiries include the welfare of student populations, extension of visa, lack of financial support for those unemployed, non-payment of salaries, closing down of commercial establishments and questions on quarantine upon arrival.

Over the past two weeks since disruptions to travel, Sri Lanka Missions abroad have been particularly vigilant and prompt in taking action towards addressing the impending issues faced, particularly by the student populations. Some of the measures put in place included ensuring that hostels remain open, that food supply/provision is maintained by the respective establishments, and that if they require medical assistance they are directed to medical facilities, wherever possible, to seek extensions of university/school payments of students. The Missions have also been directed to maintain close engagement with educational establishments with Sri Lankan students and the student community to continue to provide for their welfare.

With respect to Sri Lankan employees in the Middle East and Asia in particular, Missions will

work with host governments to secure fair treatment and concessions for Sri Lankan expatriate workers to the maximum extent possible. This includes safeguarding the rights of the workers in relation to payment of salaries and ensuring job security.

As for the broader population of Sri Lankans, Missions have also been requested to liaise with Sri Lanka Associations, organizations and places of worship established by Sri Lankans, in providing assistance to those Sri Lankans facing difficulty and are in need of assistance in the face of the rapidly evolving situation. The Missions have been requested to mobilize to provide basic sustenance and medical facilities, in full measure.

Earlier on 18 March, Sri Lanka requested foreign governments to facilitate appropriate visa extensions for Sri Lankans currently visiting their countries, in view of the control measures issued by most countries due to COVID-19. A number of states have positively responded to this request, and the Sri Lanka Missions have been asked to communicate the modalities for this process to those affected, while engaging other host Governments to work out reciprocal arrangements, as Sri Lanka extended this facility to all foreign nationals presently in Sri Lanka since mid-March.

Ministry of Foreign Relations
Colombo
28 March 2020