

The Sri Lanka Missions in South Asia, in collaboration with the Foreign Ministry, have been closely engaging with the Sri Lankan communities overseas and are working towards assisting and facilitating the many Sri Lankan expatriates in the region in the wake of the COVID-19 epidemic. Mission wise, databases of Sri Lankan students and other expatriates are being compiled by the Missions with a view to keeping in close contact and ensuring their welfare at all times.

The Government of Sri Lanka with its recent announcement requesting all Sri Lankan expatriates to remain in their current locations until the risk of COVID-19 is minimized, has further assured that requests for return of Sri Lankans will be considered once the spread of the virus is contained in the country.

Meanwhile the Sri Lanka Missions in New Delhi, Chennai, Mumbai, Kathmandu, Islamabad, Dhaka, Kabul and Malé have established 'hotlines' and social media groups and have been networking with Sri Lankans overseas and community organizations and representatives assisting them to stay in their current locations in a safe environment, in compliance with local regulations and also to ensure that those Sri Lankans in different locations have access to food and other necessities.

Missions have also been coordinating and discussing with the respective authorities and have also intervened and sought clearances for visa extensions, as required. Certain Missions have also been liaising with local health authorities in preparing COVID-19 awareness messages in Sinhala language for circulation of messages to the community via mobile devices. With forecasted lockdowns in certain stations, these Missions have taken necessary steps to set up sub-offices at the residences of Diplomatic Staff, to work from home and continue the services to the community.

To ensure that the large numbers of Sri Lankan students enrolled in universities in these countries have continued access to hostel, canteen and medical facilities, the Sri Lanka Missions have been liaising with the respective academic institutions and continue to maintain constant dialogue with student groups. The Missions have also been in discussion with University Vice Chancellors, Registrars, Deans and other educational institutions to facilitate students by rescheduling their vacations and exams. Discussions are also being held in ensuring the stipends reach the scholars uninterrupted.

From a regional perspective, in its efforts to combat COVID-19, SAARC leaders recently agreed on the establishment of the SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund with voluntary contributions of the member countries, which includes Sri Lanka's pledge of US\$ 5 million.

Further, in strengthening Sri Lanka's medical services and to ensure the uninterrupted supply of medicine and preparedness in view of the current public health emergency, the Foreign Ministry has already bilaterally sought the support and assistance from South Asian countries to assist in obtaining pharmaceutical items and medical equipment on a G-to-G purchasing scheme, considering the present emergency situation.

As an additional measure enabling the Government of Sri Lanka to reach out worldwide and provide assistance during emergencies such as the COVID19 outbreak, the Foreign Ministry has invited all Lankans overseas to register on the online web portal "Contact Sri Lanka" jointly created by the Foreign Ministry and Information & Communication Technology Agency of Sri Lanka (ICTA). The portal was launched last week by the Ministry.

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