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வெளிநாட்டு உறவுகள் அமைச்சு
MINISTRY OF FOREIGN RELATIONS

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Media Release

Foreign Ministry and Foreign Employment Bureau team up to step up efforts to assist Sri Lankans in the Middle East

Sri Lanka Missions in the Middle East have reported that the welfare measures for migrant workers in the Middle East have received an added boost this week, following the decision by the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) to make available resources from the Workers' Welfare Fund, originally confined to those registered with the Bureau, to all migrant workers irrespective of their registration status, through units within Sri Lanka Missions abroad in 16 stations. This is in addition to funds already allocated by the Foreign Ministry and services provided by Missions in collaboration with local Sri Lankan associations and religious establishments across the world in 67 cities. The Foreign Ministry has also sought an additional allocation from the Treasury to meet the increasing needs of all Overseas Sri Lankans, presently amidst the COVID-19 outbreak, to increase the efforts of distribution of dry rations. This is to help overcome immediate difficulties experienced by the migrants who are unable to return to Sri Lanka, in view of the present closure of the airports in Sri Lanka for arrival, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These measures were the focus of a video conference held on Wednesday (15 April) chaired by Foreign Secretary Ravinatha Aryasinha and attended by senior officials overseeing the region and with the Ambassadors of Sri Lanka Missions and Consulates in the Middle East. Generic issues and other aspects of the present crisis, were also discussed during the meeting. Heads of Mission and SLBFE Heads of Unit in Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Iran and Israel participated in the discussion. Earlier last Friday (10 April), Minister of Foreign Relations, Skills Development, Employment and Labour Relations, Dinesh Gunawardena met with the respective Secretaries and senior officials of the Ministry of Foreign Relations, the Ministry of Skills Development, Employment and Labour Relations, as well as senior officials of the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE), at the Ministry of Foreign Relations, where policy changes were discussed to address issues relating to migrant workers, particularly in the context of the ramifications emanating from the present Coronavirus pandemic. This was followed by a meeting of the SLBFE Board of Members, where the proposed changes were formally endorsed.

Special emphasis was placed to address the consequences resulting from the increasing cases of unemployment, loss of contracts, non-extension of work permits, and halting of temporary freelance work, which have left sections of these workers in need of urgent assistance to maintain their basic living conditions and also to ensure that their families back home are assisted where possible. Taking note of the need to diplomatically and politically engage countries which have already declared Amnesty, permitting the workers to leave, the Ministry instructed the Sri Lanka Missions to commence negotiations with local authorities and respective Labour Ministries to reach possible settlements in legalizing the status of unregistered workers and also to find amicable solutions to various disputes that have arisen due to violation of contract agreements, loss of employment and legal status.

The Missions also reported to the Ministry that in the case of those Sri Lankans who reach out for medical assistance on account of being suspected or having contracted the COVID-19, immediate measures are being taken to direct them to the local hospitals providing medical facilities and thereafter to be constantly monitored by the Embassy officials.

The video conference also discussed the support extended by multilateral organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Red Crescent Society, in some countries in the distribution of food rations to needy Sri Lankans, and assistance for the provision of medical advice and consultation extended to Sri Lankans through community volunteers specialized in this field. Appreciating this support and the need for continued assistance, the Ministry has made representations seeking additional support to all Sri Lanka Missions to the IOM and International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC) Headquarters in Geneva through the Sri Lanka Permanent Mission in Geneva and their Heads of Agency in Sri Lanka.

The establishment of databases to gather information on the Sri Lankans in each country set up by the Missions has facilitated compilation of data on/about the Sri Lankan workforce, which is presently shared with the Ministry. In addition, the 'Contact Sri Lanka' online portal launched by the Foreign Ministry and widely circulated among the communities overseas, presently serves as an ideal platform for information sharing and engagement with the Ministry and the Missions particularly at this time of crisis. As of 15 April, 21,575 of the 59,419 who have registered on the portal are resident in the Middle East region.

The Foreign Ministry has instructed all Missions to continue maintaining the 24-hour emergency hotlines and to deploy Embassy staff on a continuous duty roster to attend to the daily needs and queries of the Sri Lankan communities in these respective stations.

Ministry of Foreign Relations
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