



Ministry of Foreign Relations

**33rd ANNUAL CONFERENCE
OF
THE ORGANISATION OF PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS (OPA)**

**"BOUNCE BACK - Disasters are Opportunities"
Digital Conference 2020**

**The Role of Foreign Employment in the Economic Revival
of Sri Lanka; Challenges and Opportunities**

Address by

Ravinatha Aryasinha

Secretary

Ministry Foreign Relations of Sri Lanka

Colombo, 27 June 2020

The Role of Foreign Employment in the Economic Revival of Sri Lanka; Challenges and Opportunities

By all accounts, it is widely acclaimed that Sri Lanka did exceptionally well in facing, managing, and since 1st May ensuring that not a single case of social transmission of Covid-19 has emerged. As at 27 June 2020 while there have been 2033 Covid-19 positive detections, only 313 (16.40) have been through social transmission. 947 (46.58%) was from the 'Navy Cluster', and 773 (38.02%) was from imported cases. According to the Health Ministry, as we speak, with 1661 recovered, the recovery rate of Sri Lanka's Covid-19 patients stands at 80.55 %, which is considerably higher than the world recovery rate of 56.39%. With only 11 deaths, the last on 01 June 2020, the fatality rate of Sri Lankan Covid-19 patients is only 0.55%, which is also significantly lower than the global fatality rate of 5.2%.”¹

This success has largely been due to the leadership of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa who through the early appointment of a Covid-19 Task Force and constant monitoring, had prepared for all contingencies, along with the health authorities, security forces, other emergency services, as well as the public services, which marshaled their officers to adapt to and deal with the emerging challenges.

While catering to the protection and needs of those within the borders of Sri Lanka, the government was confronted with the important parallel task of addressing the ramifications of the pandemic on Overseas Sri Lankans (OSLs). Around 10% of Sri Lanka's population is overseas at the given moment, which formed anything between 2 - 2.5 Million. A bulk of this number was migrant workers, estimated to be approximately 1.5 Million. According to the Central Bank report of 2019, based on those registered with the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE), 30% were domestic workers, 25.2 % unskilled workers, 1.5% Semi-Skilled Labour, and 30.9% Skilled Labour. The rest non-Labour category constituted - Professional 4.9%, Mid-level 2.8%, Clerical and Related 4.5%². They mainly reside and work in countries in the GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates).

I believe your invitation to me to lead off the discussion in today's programme, is an acknowledgement of the relevance of the Ministry of Foreign Relations and its Missions abroad in facing the challenges presented in catering to the protection and needs of this significant category of OSLs – the Migrant Workers, under the leadership of Foreign

¹COVID-19: Live Situational Analysis Dashboard of Sri Lanka - Health Promotion Board of Sri Lanka, <https://hpb.health.gov.lk/covid19-dashboard/>

²Central Bank of Sri Lanka, Annual Report 2019 (Vol.1) pg 159

Relations Minister Dinesh Gunawardena, who also holds the portfolio as the Minister of Foreign Employment under which comes the Sri Lanka Foreign Employment Bureau (SLBFE).

As a starting point, I would like to note that through a series of five 'Notes to Cabinet', commencing on 08 April 2020, and the most recent three days ago (on 24 June 2020), we have endeavored to anticipate the needs of Overseas Sri Lankans amidst Covid-19. These have been developed in consultation with our Missions abroad, and bilateral and group consultations with Colombo based Diplomatic representatives particularly from labour receiving countries, and also direct conversations by Sri Lankan leaders with leaders of those host nations, seeking to differentiate the categories seeking redress and to lessen to the extent possible their vulnerability.

Today, my remarks will initially focus on the immediate twin challenges we faced over the past 5 months and continue to, in repatriating those who want to return home, and meeting the existential needs of the bulk of our Overseas Sri Lankan (OSLs) across the world who chose to remain where they were. However, what is more telling are the deeper lessons learnt in the process of taking care of our people overseas - which I would like to approach as Challenges and Opportunities in the realm of foreign employment, brought in to sharper focus in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis. I would argue, that despite its immediate gloom, the present situation has been an eye opener in many respects that could help correct structural, procedural and human interface incongruities in labour migration. It also presents an opportunity for Sri Lanka to re-orient the opportunities of foreign employment for our people in a post-Covid-19 world, sensitive to the ground realities in both Sri Lanka and the migrant labour receiving countries, so that the future footprint of 'Foreign Employment' Sri Lanka will provide the world - though probably Smaller, could be Smarter and more Sustainable.

2. Repatriation of those who want to return home

From the perspective of the Foreign Ministry, no doubt the biggest challenge in recent months has been to address the concerns and demands of a rather distressed OSL population wishing to return to their motherland.

In enabling repatriation of OSLs, the Foreign Ministry closely coordinates with the Presidential Secretariat and the Covid-19 Presidential Task Force which decides as to which flights are to be operated and the respective modalities. The SriLankan Airlines collaborates on the travel logistics, the Security Forces are responsible for quarantine and the Health Authorities prepare for medical checks and contingencies.

Sometimes this has included need to reconcile contending institutional priorities, and on occasion even requiring course-correction. This reconciling and priority setting has been done based on feedback of the 67 Missions/Posts of Sri Lanka spread across the globe with the coordination of the Foreign Ministry. Of these Missions/Posts, we were also supported by dedicated units of the SLBFE in 16 capitals in the major migrant labour receiving states.

As of 25 June 2020, 10,355 Overseas Sri Lankans have been evacuated on repatriation flights undertaken beginning 1 February 2020 when 33 students were evacuated from the danger zone in Wuhan, China. This number also includes the pilgrims who were stranded in India and other intermittent groups of workers from Italy, Republic of Korea and Europe who returned before the airport closed for all arrivals on 22 March 2020. Since the opening of the airport to repatriation flights from around the world on 21 April 2020, approximately 2,360 (22.79%) of the repatriations have been from the category of migrant workers.

However, we must be mindful that based on the 'Contact Sri Lanka' web portal of the Foreign Ministry and Mission records, as was reported to the Cabinet of Ministers this week, **52,401 OSLs from 117 countries remain to be repatriated as of 16 June 2020.** Students awaiting to return are 2,590 (4.9 %), short-term visa holders 5,825 (11.12%) while of the rest, **39,001 are migrant workers (74.43%), of which 26,321 (50.23%) are living in the Middle East.**

From the outset, as the institution responsible for the welfare of all categories of OSLs, the Foreign Ministry's representations to Government on repatriation have been based on bringing relief to the most vulnerable categories – i.e. students, those with medical emergencies, and the migrant workers who are out of legal status/have lost employment/in non-receipt of salaries, and are not in a position to maintain themselves in a foreign country. In all instances of repatriation flights involving migrant workers, the Foreign Ministry received guidance from the SLBFE on the ground, to prioritize those who were most vulnerable. Since mid-May, the Ministry has also been quite vocal in requesting migrant workers (as we did students and parents), to carefully weigh the possible impact of sudden repatriation at this time on their jobs and education, before availing of the limited flights being operated by the Government for those facing compelling circumstances.³

The Foreign Ministry has also worked mindful of the key limiting factor, the availability of quarantine facilities. While student evacuations commenced on 21 April from South Asia, pertinent to our topic under discussion, the first batch of migrant workers repatriated was on 17 May from the UAE. The progression of the latter, hit an early difficulty following the very high rate of infection, when from those returning from Kuwait on 19 May, 372 out of 466 tested positive to Covid-19. This was at a time the Sri Lanka Navy cluster was also at its

³<https://www.mfa.gov.lk/osls-to-rethink-repat/>

height. This required a revising of the evacuation plans in the context of not only less dense quarantine facilities, but also possible increased demands on medical treatment. The need for rotational selection of destinations for repatriation - with high risk as well as low risk destinations interspersed was necessary, in order to prevent a fresh threat from emerging within the society from any repatriated person who is infected.

It is in this context that commencing 4 June the Government insisted that all passengers arriving in the country obtain PCR tests prior to boarding. Repatriation from migrant worker centric destinations was to resume on 13 June from the Maldives. As of now, according to plans laid out by the government, by the 7 July, there would have been at least one flight to all destinations which have a large migrant worker presence, with multiple flights to Male, Dubai, Qatar, Dhaka and Singapore.

Apart from large concentrations of migrant workers in the Middle East region that continue to seek to be repatriated, it is noted that there are also small pockets of migrant workers, as well as short term visa holders, dispersed in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean Islands, parts of Europe and Asia and in cities spread across USA and Canada, that have not been directly accessed through the recent/planned flights. The vulnerability of these groups is being taken into consideration when future flights are earmarked. In parallel, the allowance for use of fully paid special charter flights and group quarantine is also under consideration, outside the repatriations presently done on a strictly first come first serve basis by Sri Lanka Missions abroad.

3. Meeting the existential needs of OSLs who have chosen to remain

The Foreign Ministry's 'Contact Sri Lanka' Web Portal

-This serves as a virtual 'help desk' for the benefit of OSLs. Since its launch on 26 March 2020, to-date, 86,613 Sri Lankans have registered on the Portal and a dedicated team operating effectively 24/7, have answered 12,912 questions posed by OSLs from across the globe - mainly on assistance on repatriation and consular issues, but also relating to other operational and policy matters.

-The portal has been able to direct Sri Lankans to the nearest Sri Lanka Diplomatic Mission, especially where there is no Sri Lankan representation in the countries concerned, and also to help connect vulnerable categories of Sri Lankans who are in need of food and also face medical emergencies, with provision of dry rations, medicines and in some occasions facilitating arrangements for shelter. It has also prompted streamlining issues pertaining to transfer of funds by migrants to Sri Lanka and to short term travelers and students from Sri Lanka. Some Missions have also helped students who faced issues in educational institutions and those whose employment contracts have expired to secure new employment

agreements through Missions, so that they are not compelled to return due to unemployment.

Providing relief assistance

- In offering relief to vulnerable segments in the Middle East and other locations, the Ministry has disbursed over SLRs 42.6 Million to Sri Lanka Missions Abroad to provide dry rations, basic medicine, protective gear, as well as internal transportation to affected Sri Lankans to move to safer locations.

-It is noted that in destinations where procurement of dry rations is a challenge and costly due to shortages, the Ministry had procured necessary basic survival/sustenance goods and airlifted these items as per the ground requirement in each city. At present, a total of 5000 packs of dry rations/ready-to-eat food items and medicine amounting to SLRs. 15.5 Million have been dispatched to the Maldives, UAE and Qatar. SriLankan Airlines has carried these goods on a gratis basis.

Incentives in remitting foreign exchange

- Given the difficulties particularly migrant workers encountered in the immediate aftermath of Covid-19 in remitting funds to families back in Sri Lanka, and also the drastic downward trend in the inflows to the Current Account of the country, since mid-April the Foreign Ministry took steps to liaise closely with the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL) to look at ways to promote the Special Deposit Accounts introduced by CBSL to attract foreign remittances. This was done through getting the Sri Lanka missions abroad to provide adequate publicity and encourage the Sri Lankan expat community. The other was looking at ways to encourage foreign remittances, particularly from the Middle East, for migrant workers in the Middle East to send money through established financial systems, by providing an additional payment for every dollar transferred.

-This was to see fruition recently with the government, through the central bank and state banks including the regional development bank, advocating an incentive payment scheme to all those who remits foreign currencies to Sri Lanka mainly to benefit migrant workers, in order that they get some extra money. It entails giving Rs. 10 per US Dollar equivalent to that amount, depending on the currency of remittance over the standard bank buying rate, so that inward remittance is further incentivized. We are confident that this measure will result in the increase of remittances in the short term.

Diplomatic Representations on behalf of the interests of Migrant Workers

In addition to the above efforts, Sri Lanka Missions abroad have proactively engaged in assisting a number of Sri Lankans in distress and in need of assistance with regard to their status as given below:

- Under a Special Amnesty (Sanatoria) introduced by the Italian Government, the Sri Lanka Embassy in Rome and the Consulate General in Milan have facilitated to provide consular assistance to over 10,000 Sri Lankans in the process of regularizing their visa status.

- The Sri Lanka Embassy in Beirut has successfully managed to seek PCR testing to be conducted by the Government of Lebanon for the Sri Lankans seeking to be repatriated. The Missions has been able to obtain a full waiver of the requirement of a payment of USD100 per head. Pursuant to representations made by the Sri Lanka Mission in the United Arab Emirates, the UAE and Qatar have conducted free PCR testing, for Sri Lankans seeking to be repatriated.

- With the active campaigning of the Sri Lanka Embassy in Warsaw, Poland, the Romanian Government intervened and arranged to safeguard employment for 36 Sri Lankan workers stranded at the Bucharest Airport in Romania. In Jordan the Sri Lanka Embassy in Amman, has negotiated with apparel companies and had secured 46 new job opportunities for Sri Lankans who lost their jobs due to closure of their Apparel factories due to Covid-19 pandemic. Rotation of migrant workers has already commenced to the Republic of Korea.

- Initiated by the Sri Lanka Embassy in Havana, a Cuban medical team attended to the medical needs of 100 Sri Lankans employed in Haiti enabling the factory owners to continue operations under the supervision of the Cuban doctors.

Mitigating the economic impact to Sri Lanka due to the Pandemic and supporting the revival of the economy

- The Foreign Ministry has continued its engagement with key Government Economic Agencies and the private sector to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. Exports which accounted for US\$ 277 Million in April 2020 had increased to US\$600 Million in May, and it is likely that this upward trend will maintain the momentum in the coming months in line with revised projections.

- Sri Lanka has also been able to promote new products through the assistance of the Missions' network, particularly to find markets for Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) and rubber based products (face masks in 12 markets, protective gowns in 17 markets, rubber gloves in 12 markets, hand sanitizers in 12 markets). Trade facilitation efforts of the

Ministry assisted in consignments of 344 MT and 220 MT of Ceylon Tea being exported to Turkey and Egypt, and 30 MT of frozen food exported to Oman, despite these challenging circumstances.

- The Ministry together with the Export Development Board additionally identified 15 potential sectors with a view to capturing new markets and also strengthening the demand in existing markets. These sectors are now being mapped out taking into account the current constraints, challenges, as well as opportunities.

- The Missions abroad and the private sector are working in collaboration with SriLankan Airlines which continues to operate cargo flights to several key destinations of economic importance to Sri Lanka. These cargo flights are also used for the purpose of repatriation of OSLs, which helps reduce the operational costs.

- The Ministry is also presently engaged with efforts led by the Tourism authorities to open the country to foreign tourists in a healthy way.

4. Challenges

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed a number of vulnerabilities which have been associated with Sri Lanka's practice of Foreign Employment, ever since it began in the 1970s.

- i) Of an estimated 1.5 Million migrant workers abroad, the limited number that continues to be registered with SLBFE at the time of Covid-19 struck, is a matter of concern. It is believed that some, who might have originally registered at the point of leaving the country, however might not have subsequently renewed their registration. Effectively, they had no safety net as Covid-19 struck.
- ii) Recent weeks have also exposed the significant number of Sri Lankan migrant workers abroad who are undocumented/irregular, and as a result are ineligible to avail of medical and other benefits in their host countries, and are also vulnerable to deportation if identified. In Kuwait alone, where it is estimated that there are over 110,000, there are said to be 18,000 who are out of status, according to the Kuwaiti authorities.
- iii) Even for those who are legal, a consequence of Covid-19 has been the shrinking of the employment market - increasing cases of unemployment, loss of contracts, non-extension of work permits and halting of temporary freelance work, which have left many of them largely destitute. For instance in Saudi Arabia where there are an estimated 130,000 OSLs, evidence suggest that the jobs of those employed in the Domestic Sector, which includes housemaids, house drivers, gardeners,

- housekeeper etc.(approx. 35% of Sri Lankan migrants), has been relatively more secure. The main sector which has been affected due to Covid -19 pandemic was the 'semi-skilled' sector, which includes most of the service sector staff, i.e. waiters, petty chefs, baristas, cab drivers etc. 72% of the job losses were reported from the 'semi-skilled' sector, compared to only 9% from the domestic sector.⁴
- iv) Given the contraction of the economies in the major labour receiving countries of relevance to Sri Lanka mainly in the Middle East, this could lead to a serious shortfall in the numbers of migrant workers this year. From an average of 17,000 departures per month, of those who migrated overseas for foreign employment from Sri Lanka, the numbers have virtually come to a halt at present. Bilesha Weeraratne from Institute of Policy Studies notes that “from mid-March to end May, the missed foreign employment opportunities for Sri Lankans amount to around 37,500 jobs⁵”.
- v) Correspondingly overall, the World Bank predicts that remittances to South Asia are projected to decline sharply by 22%⁶. This could mean a drop in workers' remittances from \$ 6.7 Billion in 2019 to possibly around \$5.23 Billion in 2020. According to the Central Bank, in April 2020 alone, remittances declined by 32%⁷ which would imply a considerable gap in the contribution from migrant workers to foreign exchange earnings which in 2019 was 25.5 %, also to Sri Lanka's GDP, which was 8% (7.8%)⁸.
- vi) An additional challenge or rather a realization, from a sociological and humane perspective has been the considerable disconnect between the high expectations in the mindset of the migrant workers of their relative importance within the Sri Lankan polity in terms of their contribution to the economy which has been reflected in the term “rata wiruwo”, when juxtaposed with the reality of relatively low sensitivity and attention demonstrated to their plight among the average Sri Lankan, who may have harbored concerns that an influx of those from abroad would swell the numbers of those infected domestically. If one were to read the social media posts and comments to articles on the issue of repatriation by the contending parties, this constitutes a challenge not only to those who seek to return and others who resist it, but also has a broader sociological impact on the families, including the children of those employed overseas.

⁴Based on information from the Sri Lankan Embassy in Saudi Arabia, 26 June 2020.

⁵<https://www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics/2020/05/14/repatriation-and-replacement-of-lost-foreign-jobs-handling-labour-migration-in-sri-lanka-during-covid-19/> (14 May 2020)

⁶ COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens. Migration and Development Brief, no. 32;. World Bank, Washington, DC. © World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33634> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO, pg 25

⁷ Central Bank of Sri Lanka, External Sector Performance – April 2020

https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/sites/default/files/cbslweb_documents/press/pr/press_20200622_external_sector_performance_april_2020_e.pdf

⁸ <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33634> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO, pg25

5. Opportunities

Consistent with the webinar theme '*Bounce Back – Disasters and Opportunities*', it is important that we remind ourselves, that historically, with global crisis of this magnitude, there comes certain opportunities. However, it is only those who are smart and quick to recognize the opportunity presented to re-imagine their present, and are ready to adapt and dare to look out of the box, who are able to emerge from the crisis, stronger than they were before.

- i) A first step in this endeavor is to understand that it will not be possible to return to 'normalcy' anytime soon, and that we will have to adjust to a 'new normal'. Based on candid and realistic assessments on challenges we have faced, we should, individually and collectively, build up more forward looking and resilient policies and strategies that can ensure 'sustainable and just economies'⁹.

In this new beginning, individual citizens, the private sector, as well as governments, will need to work more in tandem to help economies adjust and adapt to serve the needs of the people.

- ii) From a humanitarian perspective, the Covid-19 crisis could be deemed to have had the unintended consequence of having helped ease out those who were at the receiving end of the more troubled aspects of our foreign employment processes, that made migrant workers more vulnerable and exploited, but were unable to break away from it.

In fact, using this occasion, we must develop policies to help those prospective returnees to leave their vulnerable and precarious existence, in order that they do not become even more exploited by remaining in their host countries.

- iii) Through the 'Contact Sri Lanka' Web Portal', we have also received feedback from migrant workers in some of the most fragile environments, due to the spread of Covid-19 virus. In this process, the unethical recruitment practices, loopholes in cross border migration management, lapses in welfare systems, are some issues of concern that were most exposed during the crisis. It is not that these issues were not known previously, both in labour sending and receiving countries. However, the extent of vulnerability that has been exposed is particularly concerning.

⁹<https://www.unescap.org/announcement/discussing-accelerating-transformation-asia-and-pacific-amidst-covid-19-outbreak>

Broadly speaking, even as we promote exporting migrant labour, it is important to evolve sustainable solutions that would be needed for us to face up to future global crises, which cannot be discounted. These could range from wars and internal armed conflict, to the ramifications from climate change, challenges to food and water security and the next pandemic.

- iv) Despite much discussion and pronouncements for over a decade on developing an integrated approach and surmising about the importance to have both horizontal and vertical coordination among institutions involved in migration management for better governance, ensuring a ‘whole of government’ approach has remained an aspiration. Even agreeing on updating the ‘Foreign Employment Manual’ remains unfinished business.¹⁰

However, the present crisis has given us the opportunity to change that and walk the talk. It has helped break the silos and ensure better intra-governmental coordination in dealing with matters concerning migrant workers – both in Colombo, as well as in the destination countries. This augurs well for future collaborative efforts as an essential element that has helped us to thrive in this unprecedented circumstance to deliver as one. We should now look forward to further strengthening and build a strong protocol for the ‘whole of government’ approach on issues concerning foreign employment.

- v) The present crisis has also forced the government machinery to address migrant workers through an even more humanitarian prism, keeping the rights and wellbeing of the migrant workers at the center, irrespective of their status. While previously while all 67 Sri Lanka Missions/Posts remained responsible for the broader welfare of Sri Lankan citizens, only those registered with the SLBFE was their prime responsibility. The present crisis has seen the relaxation of this policy, to make available resources from the SLBFE’s Workers Welfare Fund, to all migrant workers irrespective of their registration status through the SLBFE units within Sri Lanka Missions abroad in 16 stations.

In turn it is hoped that this will also encourage migrant workers to register with the SLBFE, and also to continue their membership, so that they enjoy the benefits of an expanded social safety net, as successfully practiced by migrant workers in countries like the Philippines, where the percentage of registered migrant workers is 96.8%. To incentivize the continuation of registration, the migrant

¹⁰<http://193.168.195.227/mfa2019/address-by-foreign-secretary-ravinatha-aryasinha-at-the-symposium-on-the-updating-the-operational-manual-for-labour-welfare-sections-of-sri-lanka-diplomatic-missions-in-destination-countries-18-20-se/>

worker should feel the benefits of the same, with the improvement of this social benefit schemes through better insurance cover, compensation schemes, benefits for those families remaining in Sri Lanka, reintegration projects including supporting the returnees to wisely utilize their savings particularly in setting up suitable start-ups etc.

- vi) We realize that almost all economies are going to continue contracting for a period, before they return to their pre-Covid-19 trajectory of growth. Pay cuts, layoffs, freeze on recruitments, using more AI related technologies to replace man power needs etc. will be part of the 'New Normal'. In grabbing the opportunities in the post-Covid-19 situation, and ensuring sustainable growth of the economy to its full potential, which are vital to reduce inequalities in our societies, we must act collectively - internationally and regionally.

Having served as Sri Lanka's Permanent Representative in Geneva from 2012-2018 during which time Sri Lanka successively chaired the Colombo Process¹¹ (2013-2017), and the Abu Dhabi Dialogue¹² (2016-2018), Sri Lanka has had the opportunity to design and provide input on certain crucial regional modalities that could play a greater role in the post-COVID scenario, for the benefit of the migrant workers, as well as the sending and receiving countries.¹³

- It presents an opportunity on the part of Governments, to focus on **ensuring the outward flow of a better trained and skilled migrant worker**, one who will not only be able to earn more, but also is less likely to face the vulnerabilities presently encountered by the average Sri Lankan migrant worker, particularly unskilled workers. This should be guided at the policy level, by defining clearly our niche markets in terms of skills, perhaps under the auspices of ILO's decent work agenda.

- We should also combine our market research platforms to **generate vocational training programmes that will serve future job markets and economic demands** in countries post Covid-19, and recalibrate to inspire a work force that meets that demand. We should then work through our bilateral mechanisms to get mutual recognitions for those qualifications. This is going to be a triple win situation, to the qualified labourer, and to both sending and receiving countries, or to the private sector employer.

¹¹ The regional organization of Asian Group of migrant sending countries

¹² The regional organization brings together the Asian migrant sending countries and migrant receiving countries in the GCC.

¹³<http://lankamission.org/migration/1980-iom-chief-commends-sri-lanka-s-dynamism-and-perseverance-as-the-chair-of-the-colombo-process-2.html>

- We should also urgently **re-formulate our education systems, and re-orient students to be a rich human resource pool for future labour markets**, thus reducing the unemployment rates in the country. Besides generating a qualified and skilled labour force, it will enable agreeing on a 'minimum wage', and could add to our efforts in reducing inequalities and discrimination in labour markets, particularly the gender based wage gaps and gender stereotypes in work.

- Another important aspect we need to focus on is to **expedite action in enhancing cheaper, safer and faster modes of remittance flows**, considering them as private funds.

- In retrospect, speaking regionally, **had we followed through on the issue of 'migrant health', which Sri Lanka added to the focus areas of the Colombo Process agenda in 2016, I believe we might have been able to manage the Covid-19 crisis in the region better.**¹⁴ This is less so with respect to those coming back, but more with respect to those stranded in host countries, particularly with regard to undocumented workers whose access to medical facilities is limited. If we are truly committed to Universal Health Care (UHC), it cannot be achieved by leaving this segment of migrant workers vulnerable. We must ensure that 'migrant health' becomes a cornerstone in the future management of migrant populations.

I am confident that these are matters that are presently receiving the attention of the Ministry of Foreign Employment and the SLBFE, along with the UN agencies working in Sri Lanka – particularly the International Labour Organization (ILO) and also the International Organization on Migration (IOM). The Ministry of Foreign Relations and its network of Missions will continue to critically engage with these bodies, to ensure that the benefits of these efforts accrue to our people. **(ENDS)**

¹⁴<http://lankamission.org/migration/1966-the-colombo-statement-first-ever-political-commitment-agreed-by-countries-to-advance-the-migrant-health-agenda-2.html>