

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE REMARKS BY AMB SIBI GEORGE AT THE
ICWF DAY CELEBRATIONS AND VIRTUAL OPEN HOUSE AT THE
EMBASSY, AUGUST 20, 2021**

Good Afternoon everybody,

A very warm welcome to you all.

I welcome my colleague Shri Abbagani Ramu, Joint Secretary for Overseas Indian Affairs who has joined us today virtually from India. I know it is late in the evening in Delhi, and a holiday but he has accepted my invitation and joined us. I also welcome the office bearers of various Indian associations in Kuwait and media representatives who have joined us today.

Let me begin today's event by thanking His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Amir of the State of Kuwait and His Highness Sheikh Mishaal Al- Ahmed Al Jaber Al Sabah, Crown Prince of the State of Kuwait for hosting the large Indian community in Kuwait. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Government and the people of Kuwait for the personal care and support extended to Indian community during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I also extend my greetings to all Indians in Kuwait on Onam festival and also on Rakshabandan. On August 22, as part of our Onam celebrations we will share sweets and traditional payasam with all visitors at the Embassy, all visitors at our passport centers and at the shelter. I invite you all to join us for the Onam celebrations at the Embassy on August 22.

Dear Friends,

This week we are also celebrating Sanskrit Week from August 19- August 25. The Sanskrit Week is observed to promote and popularize the Sanskrit language which is part of our civilizational heritage. You would recall that we in the Mission had organized the release of Sanskrit learning App 'Little Guru' in association with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. I am happy that it has generated a momentum which is continuing in Kuwait and more Indians are learning Sanskrit today.

Dear Friends,

Today we celebrate an important day. The ICWF day. We all pravasis know what ICWF is. Indian Community Welfare Fund. Set up in 2009, it is aimed at assisting Overseas Indian nationals in times of distress and emergency in the 'most deserving cases' on a 'means tested basis'. The Fund provides all Indian Missions and Posts abroad greater flexibility in swiftly addressing to requests for assistance by Indians.

As diplomat for nearly thirty years, I remember a period when there was no such Fund available for the Missions to assist the community. I recall the days when we struggled to generate funds through various fund raising programs to run an Indian Community Benevolent Fund at our Mission in Qatar before the creation of the ICWF. I thank our leadership of the country who took the initiative of setting up this Fund to help the community in need. What is equally important is that we utilize the Fund effectively for the purpose for which it is created. There are very clear guidelines on how to utilize the funds.

It is aimed at assisting Overseas Indian nationals in distress situations, boarding and lodging for deserving distressed Indian nationals abroad, Air passage to India to stranded Indians, legal assistance to deserving Indians who have committed minor crimes, offences or have been falsely implicated by their employer and put in jails; fishermen/seamen/sailors/Indian students in distress; legal/financial assistance to Indian women abandoned/ cheated / abused by their spouses.

It also provides for payment for small fines and penalties in respect of Indians for minor offences/crimes; for illegal stay in the host country where prima facie the worker is not at fault, and to enable release of Indian nationals from jail/detention center. Transportation of Mortal Remains and expenditure on incidentals of deceased Indian national to India or local cremation/burial of deceased in such cases where the employer, sponsor or insurance company is unable or unwilling to do so as per the contract and the family is unable to meet the cost. Emergency Medical Care on means tested basis to overseas Indians who are involved in an accident (with serious life threatening injuries) have life-threatening medical conditions or suffer a serious disability.

Support for Community Welfare activities such as promote Indian Culture by organizing cultural programmes at major Indian Festivals, National Days of India; Indian culture Programs by recognized local artists or Indian artists based in India etc. Payment of honorarium for teachers/faculty teaching Indian languages, art forms. Welfare activities for Indian students towards organizing Annual Day for Indian students at Universities/educational institutions to discuss problems, issues faced by Indian students, including their visa, residence status, work permit, financial, welfare and other issues with participation of students.

Hiring of local interpreters on a case-to-case basis for consular visits. Design, publication, translation costs of pamphlets by Mission/Post about local labour laws, regulations, norms, dos & don'ts, welfare measures pertaining to overseas employment in the host country. Organizing labour camps / consular camps for interacting with Indian migrant workers and informing them about issues related to overseas employment; labour laws; welfare and protection measures of the government.

Setting up 24 x 7 toll-free helplines, walk-in resource centres for providing information, advice, guidance on problems faced by distressed Indian nationals; and helping them register their grievance with the Mission/Post. Development of e-Governance solutions, applications to address Consular/ welfare matters.

Dear Friends,

I read out from this long list of areas covered for ICWF today to ensure that all Indians in Kuwait are aware of the availability of this Fund for their welfare. Each of this I mentioned is available for our community in distress. It is your Fund. And I am proud to say that I have been able to use this Fund for the benefit of our brothers and sisters in need during my last one year stay in Kuwait. One of the first things I undertook was to set up a committee of three officers in the Mission as the ICWF committee to study each and every application and make their recommendation to me. Each of the cases of request that the Mission received were processed and assistance extended on each case on a means tested basis. Let me assure you, in coming weeks and months we will continue to use the Fund effectively to assist those in need.

Dear Friends,

Last week I had a virtual interaction with all our associations and groups. We had discussed many of the issues of concern including vaccination certificates, registration on various portals of the Kuwaiti Ministry of Health, easing of travel restrictions. I am happy to note that there are a few positive developments since our last interaction. The Government of the State of Kuwait has announced the opening of direct flights between India and Kuwait. This will address the concern of many of our brothers and sisters stranded in India for a long time. I thank the leadership of the State of Kuwait.

As we all continue our fight against Covid 19 pandemic, many of our brothers and sisters and children continue to face many challenges. Every day we see people losing their battle against Covid 19 and leaving us. For example yesterday I am told that there were ten registrations of death on a single day. My personal condolences to the families and friends of those who lost their loved ones. I thank our doctors, nurses and other medical professional for their continued support to many who are facing difficulties. Our community, particularly the youth continue to be in the forefront of blood donation in Kuwait. Today morning I attended a blood donation camp where hundreds of our youth were lined up to donate blood. I thank all associations and groups who take such initiatives.

I am happy to give an update on the assistance by ICSG for the families of people who died due to Covid 19 pandemic. Assistance of Rs. One lakh has been sent to ninety seven families so far. I am happy that within three weeks of announcement the payment has started and is continuing in a fast pace. I once again thank ICSG for the assistance. I will continue to update you on this.

Dear Friends,

Today, I would like to focus on ICWF. We will have a presentation by First Secretary Shri Fahad Ahmed Khan Suri on ICWF and also on the activities of the Mission in July/August. We will also release our first Labour bulletin prepared by the Community Welfare and Labour Wing of the Mission today. My colleague First Secretary Shri Rahul has taken the initiative to publish this in house bulletin. This is part of our efforts to improve the quality of community welfare service in the Mission. We will soon publish a consular booklet as well.

A few initiatives that we plan to launch in coming weeks: (i) Goodwill evenings where we will organize various cultural evenings in labour camps in Kuwait with the participation of our laborers, with the cooperation of employers; (ii) setting up an exclusive Arabic translation cell to help those who need such services in courts, labour offices and various other government offices; and (iii) a new social media question and answer weekly bulletin where we publish all queries that we receive in the Mission with our responses so that the entire community gets benefited. We will work out the modalities of each of these initiatives and update you.

I thank you for the overwhelming response to my appeal to associations to nominate at least one volunteer in the Google registration form. We are examining each of the registrations. Most of our associations have nominated at least one volunteer. I really appreciate this. This shows the importance that our associations attach to welfare of the community. The idea of volunteers' registration is to streamline the issue of social workers which has some inherent issues. We will address those in coming weeks and months.

This week, I had a good meeting with PAM. Discussed a series of issues, including the implementation of the MoU on streamlining the Recruitment of Domestic Workers. We will soon hold a meeting of the Joint Working Group. We discussed with PAM a list of companies and employers who are placed in a banned list of companies by India. We also have a number of sponsors who have not been cooperating with the Embassy when it comes to Domestic Workers welfare. Please be very careful dealing with such companies. We will continue to update this list of companies and individuals.

I would like to remind you about our Embassy helpline team handling twelve WhatsApp numbers and our 24x7 helpline numbers. They are our 'Rapid Response Team' for answering your queries on travel guidelines and vaccination certification registration and all issues of concern. We keep updating the officers concerned on the new guidelines. Let me assure you we will extend all support.

I will conclude with an update on the NEET examination. Mission is making all preparations for the safe and secure conduct of the NEET examination on September 12. I now request my colleague Joint Secretary Shri Abbagani Ramu to say a few words, after that, I will be happy to get your suggestions and also answer your questions.

Thank you.