

Remarks by Amb Sibi George, 'Indian Diplomacy During Covid: Challenges and Opportunities'; Sept 28, 2020

Manager of St George's College Rev Dr. Augustine Palackaparambil, Principal Dr. Reji Varghese Mekkadan, Course Coordinator Rev Father George Pullukalayil, Professors, Students, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to speak on this important topic 'Indian Diplomacy During Covid: Challenges and Opportunities'.

It is a very interesting and important topic, not only for diplomats and governments but also for all pravasis, their families and friends, and for everyone affected by Covid pandemic.

I thank Manager Rev Dr. Augustine Palackaparambil and Principal Dr. Reji Varghese Mekkadan for inviting me today.

Like every pravasi abroad I also long to be at my hometown. Year before last, I had the opportunity to visit my Alma-mater, Pala St Thomas College and address the students. Today I value this invitation to address the students and faculty of Aruvithura St George's College.

These are difficult times for all, all across the world, governments and people are struggling to face the challenges of Covid 19 pandemic. I begin by paying my tributes to doctors and nurses and other medical professionals who lost their lives trying to save the lives of others. I also express my sincere gratitude to thousands doctors and nurses who all over the world work day in and day out to save lives. Since my arrival in Kuwait last month, I have seen how doctors and nurses from India work here to save lives. I thank them for their service to the humanity.

Dear friends,

The Covid 19 crisis which began as a health challenge, has evolved as an economic disruption, a geopolitical shock and a social challenge of

unimaginable proportions. Today it has emerged as a global challenge of a magnitude that humanity has not experienced in recent history. It is throwing up new challenges every day to every country and every society including in India and here in Kuwait. It has also affected relations between countries at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels. The pandemic and the chaos it created has made us take a closer look at some of the fundamental aspects of international diplomacy and the much debated concept of globalization.

I was in Switzerland when the Covid 19 pandemic began. Having spent the first four months of the pandemic in Europe and the last two months in Kuwait, I have personally witnessed how life has changed for many across the globe, how the pandemic has hurt one and all, across regions and continents, irrespective of one's nationality or wealth. I have experienced how globalization has thrown up major challenges and at the same time how diplomacy endeavored to convert some of these challenges into opportunities.

Let me share a bit of personal experience as a diplomat. It was indeed a satisfying experience to be in Switzerland as Ambassador, also representing India to The Holy See and Principality of Lichtenstein. It was a great honour for any diplomat to represent their country in three countries together, to go to bed every night and get up everyday morning thinking about a President, a Prince and a Pope, The Holy Father. Like most other diplomats, I was also busy building India's relations in various fields including political, economic, scientific, cultural and discussing cooperation on global issues like climate change, energy security, renewable energy, and fight against terrorism.

While in Switzerland, I was happy to build excellent political relations at the highest level. We received Hon'ble Rashtrapatiji for a State visit to Switzerland and Hon'ble Prime Minister to Davos for the World Economic Forum annual meeting. We arranged visits of Foreign Minister and President of Switzerland to India, we negotiated India – Switzerland Science and Innovation Alliance and we signed Agreement for exchange of information on tax evasion, also called black money. Bilateral trade with Switzerland went up by 18%. We were able to build on a theme 'Connecting Himalayas with Alps' including

through a Festival of India spanning several weeks spread across fifteen cities in Switzerland and Liechtenstein. In Vatican, one attends the canonization of Saint Mariam Theresa by Pope and welcome our Cardinals and our Bishops from India.

All these diplomatic activities which are dear to any Ambassador, changed suddenly with Covid 19 pandemic. Your priority shifted to saving lives of Indians abroad. You started focusing on arranging food and shelter for stranded Indians including in rich Europe. You see many businesses crumbling, people losing jobs in hundreds and thousands and found many stranded abroad craving to return home. The bigger the diaspora, the bigger were the new challenges of diplomacy.

I recall the panic phone calls received in the Embassy from students and tourists who were looking for shelter; panic calls from that young lady requesting kits for herself and her child to test for Covid as her husband was admitted in ICU infected by Covid. No kits were available and it became the responsibility of the Ambassador to arrange it. A task we did successfully.

You also start negotiating with big pharma companies in Switzerland for medicines and vaccines, test kits and medical equipment, including for those yet to be developed.

At the same time you feel rejoiced to see the Indian flag displayed over the Matterhorn Mountain in the Alps in Zermat, one of the highest points in Europe.

Life has changed for all, including for us diplomats. Diplomats also started to address issues such as the name to be given to the new virus, whether the name to be linked with its country of its origin or its city of origin, whether the pandemic could have been prevented or not. The style and format of diplomacy has changed, no travels, no visits, no physical meetings, only virtual meetings and video conferences. Everyone has overnight become digital friendly.

It is in the middle of all this that I moved to Kuwait. We faced many challenges in Kuwait, the scale is different, as we have large diaspora there. We have a million Indians in Kuwait, and they faced a million challenges. We thank the

Kuwaiti leadership for hosting a large Indian community. Many associations, groups and volunteers were working hand in hand with Embassy to support Indians in distress. Their safety and wellbeing are priorities for the Mission.

Within a week of my arrival in Kuwait, I received over a thousand emails/letters from many of our fellow citizens in different parts of Kuwait and even from India, from all walks of life, on a number of issues of concern. Many letters are written on behalf of thousands of people, on issues that affect several thousands.

These issues included very important topics such as Indians stranded in Kuwait, Indians with resident permit in Kuwait and currently stranded in India, those with children stranded in India and wanting to join their parents, Indians stranded in other countries and wanting to transit through Kuwait, those who want travel documents like passports and Emergency Certificates, those who applied for travel documents but yet to receive them, those who received travel documents but could not travel during Amnesty, expiry of resident permits, groups who face nonpayment of salary, nonpayment of arrears, labor disputes, cheating by agents, loss of jobs and livelihood, loss of documents, those who do not have food, shelter and medicines, request from those who got stranded in ships and vessels, dispatch of mortal remains of loved ones who died here, pending death compensation cases, family disputes, the list has been long. Handling these issues are among the many challenges that an Indian diplomat abroad faces today. My endeavor has been to address these challenges in collaboration with stakeholders including our Central Government, State Governments, Airlines, host government authorities and of course the people affected. We work hand in hand with various groups and associations. We opened up the Mission through Open Houses and constant engagement. We continue the supply of food materials. Everything is work in progress including the Vande Bharat Mission of return of Indians stranded abroad and efforts to arrange return of stranded Indians to Kuwait. It is not over.

While we handle these priorities at bilateral levels, we cannot afford to ignore the bigger picture and major diplomatic challenges that we continue to face. Let me quote our Foreign Secretary Shri Harsh Vardhan Shringla who said in a recent address, “The novel coronavirus outbreak has come as a major

geopolitical shock, and will have a long term impact on world politics. We are likely to see changes in hard and soft power balances; emergence of new multilateral conversations and changes in relative strength of stakeholders in these conversations; and greater dispersal of power, resources and capacity across the world. India's choices, challenges and opportunities in this new global environment will also be affected."

India's diplomatic efforts to shape global thinking and project our perspectives have continued through the Covid pandemic. We continued our bilateral, regional and multilateral engagement at all levels. We continued to engage world leaders at the summit level and ministerial level. Prime Minister had spoken to over seventy counterparts in recent months including with the Prime Minister of Kuwait. External Affairs Minister has spoken to over eighty of his counterparts, again including with the Foreign Minister of Kuwait. Foreign Secretary and senior officials are in constant touch with their counterparts at all levels. At the regional level, India took the initiative of convening a virtual meeting of South Asian leaders. We held the India-EU Summit and participated at the G20 and Non-Aligned Movement virtual summits. India also digitally attended BRICS and SCO meetings. We also digitally observed the 'International Day of Yoga' on 21 June, which was adopted by the United Nations. We will now celebrate the 'International Day of Non-Violence' on 2 October again digitally. In the middle of the pandemic India got elected to the UN Security Council for the period 2021-22. At the same time we had to confront and defeat several concerted attempts of anti-India propaganda, infiltration and even aggression.

Dear Friends,

Even in the middle of the pandemic and in the midst of several challenges, we kept our flag flying by proactively engaging the international community. Let me quote from Prime Minister's address to the UN General Assembly last week. He said, I quote, "Even during these very difficult times of a raging pandemic, the pharma industry of India has sent essential medicines to more than 150 countries. As the largest vaccine producing country of the world, I want to give one more assurance to the global community today. India's vaccine production and delivery capacity will be used to help all humanity in fighting this crisis. We are moving ahead with phase 3 clinical trials in India

and in our neighbourhood. India will also help all the countries in enhancing their cold chain and storage capacities for the delivery of Vaccines.” Unquote.

Dear Friends,

Now let's take a look at some of the opportunities that the challenges of the global pandemic offers for India. One of our priorities is to make India the nerve centre of global supply chains. Our endeavor to promote India as an alternative manufacturing hub and an innovation destination is continuing. In my Mission in Kuwait I have launched a series of events aimed at strengthening our partnership with Kuwait.

In the short term, in our relations with the Gulf countries, there exists an opportunity to enhance our presence in sectors where we have been traditionally strong. This include sectors such as textiles, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, gems and jewelry, food materials etc. Thinking beyond short term, we could move up the value chain in several sectors such as pharmaceuticals, electronics, engineering, design outsourcing etc. It also gives opportunity to work on development of cutting edge technologies and intellectual property across several sectors.

In these efforts India considers Kuwait and our friendly countries in the Gulf region as natural partners and many other friendly countries as natural partners. To quote Foreign Secretary, “In the past five years, Think West – our outreach to the Gulf and West Asian countries – has become an increasingly important pillar of our foreign policy. In the pandemic period our partners in the Gulf and West Asia have cooperated with us unstintingly, to mutual benefit, and with the enhancement of mutual trust.” Unquote.

Speaking specifically about my country of accreditation Kuwait, it is part of India's extended neighborhood and the two countries are among each other's major trading partners. Our natural partnership with Kuwait is something that evolved over several generations. It is a partnership involving several stakeholders; business establishments, industry and commercial chambers, investment boards, industry groups, factories, universities, science and technology establishments, and at the root of it all are the vibrant people-to-people contacts. There are several key areas such as energy security, trade and investment, infrastructure development projects, healthcare,

automobiles, petrochemicals and education where there exists huge potential to broaden our longstanding partnership.

Dear Friends,

During the Covid 19 crisis, Indian diplomacy has been at the forefront of digital diplomacy and we are maintaining our diplomatic momentum at every level. As we start our new membership with the UN Security Council we will play a more prominent role in addressing global issues including the global fight against Covid 19 pandemic at the same time continuing our efforts to help our brothers and sisters abroad. As Hon'ble Prime Minister in his address to the UNGA said, I quote: "India will not hesitate in raising its voice against the enemies of humanity, human race and human values – terrorism, smuggling of illegal weapons, drugs and money-laundering." Unqote.

But we need answer to the most important question that he asked, "For how long will India be kept out of the decision-making structures of the United Nations?" Reform of many multilateral organizations is a challenge and priority for Indian diplomacy today.

I thank you for a patient hearing. I thank our Manager Rev Dr. Augustine Palackaparambil and Principal Dr. Reji Varghese Mekkadan for inviting me. I invite you all to visit me in Kuwait after the pandemic is defeated. I wish you all the best, Stay safe.

Thank you.