

TRANSCRIPT OF THE REMARKS BY AMB SIBI GEORGE AT THE VIRTUAL OPEN HOUSE AT THE EMBASSY, JUNE 23, 2021

Good Afternoon everybody,

A very warm welcome to our Open House of June 2021.

I welcome the office bearers of various associations and media representatives who have joined us today; I welcome the media representatives who have joined us today.

Let me begin today's open house 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 am happy to welcome my colleague and Protector General of Emigrants and Joint Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs Shri Yogeshwar Sangwan who is present among us. I have invited him to join us, and he has agreed. You would recall that I had held a round table of all Protectors of Emigrants (POEs) in India earlier this year to brief them on our efforts to streamline the recruitment process which would help the Indian workers in Kuwait, particularly our female domestic workers. They are our partners in ensuring a legal flow of our workers from India abroad. In fact he is helping us streamline the recruitment process, particularly in the background of the new MoU on Recruitment of Domestic Workers that we signed earlier this month.

The months of May/June have been a very active period for the Embassy in Kuwait. We had the visit of Hon'ble Minister of External Affairs Dr. S. Jaishankar this month from June 9-11. The visit was at the invitation of H.E. Sheikh (Dr.) Ahmed Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs. The visit came within three months of the visit to India of H.E. Minister of Foreign Affairs on March 17-18. These high level visits are

part of the enhanced political exchanges in the context of 60th anniversary of establishment of Diplomatic Relations between our two countries. This helps both sides take the relationship to a new high level of partnership and also address the issues involved. With Kuwait we have a long standing dynamic multifaceted partnership. I would like to brief you on this important visit in my address later today.

In the meantime, fight against Covid 19 pandemic and the many difficulties and restrictions associated with the pandemic continue to be our main challenge today. We have noticed that in recent days there is an increase in the number of positive cases in Kuwait. I urge all to remain alert and continue to follow all precautions and instructions of the Government of Kuwait.

We in the Embassy continue to have a few positive Covid 19 cases. I am happy that I did not have to close down the public service and we continue to operate our Consular service without a break. We in the Embassy take all precautions and undertake PCR test of each of our staff members every fortnight to keep the situation under control and to continue to maintain our Consular services and Community Welfare activities. Tomorrow all our officers and staff will undergo their periodic RT-PCR tests; this is part of our precautionary measures and our eternal vigilance against COVID-19. It has not been easy. I see it as a major achievement that in these difficult times of pandemic we are able to continue our consular services without a break. You remember in February/March we had to close down the Embassy for a few weeks due to the pandemic. So my appeal to all Indians, please apply for your consular services early. Submit your passports for renewal at least three months before expiry of validity of passport or residence permit. You can apply for renewal as early as one year before. We might have to close down public service at the Embassy on short notice depending on the COVID-19 situation, so please apply early. Let's not wait for last minute to apply for consular services. Your queries can be addressed to our twelve WhatsApp numbers.

Despite the Covid 19 related challenges, I continued my interaction with the Community and our many associations to understand the

many issues involved including on ways to address the concerns of Indians stranded in India. The decisions on most of these issues are not in our hands. But let me assure you each of these issues of concern are taken up with the authorities at the highest level. We will continue to follow up on each of these issues.

The visit of the Hon'ble Minister of External Affairs to Kuwait gave a great opportunity for us to review each of the community related issues involved. I am happy to note that during the visit of the Hon'ble External Affairs Minister on June 10, we held a meeting of all the Indian Ambassadors in the region where each of the issues related to the Indian community in the Gulf were discussed. This is the first time that a joint meeting of the Indian Ambassadors in Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain was held in Kuwait. I am happy that I hosted the meeting where the discussions focused on: 1. Ensuring utmost welfare of the Indian community in respective jurisdictions; 2. Facilitating reuniting of families separated by Covid disruption; 3. Interceding for early return of Indian talent and skills who left the Gulf during the pandemic; 4. Encouraging speedy resumption of flights to Gulf destinations to help NRIs; 5. Strongly push our trade interests that contribute to economic recovery at home.

The issue of return of those stranded in India continues to be the most important concern for many and is the most important priority for our Embassy and me personally. I continue to receive hundreds of queries seeking clarifications on exact details on the issues related to vaccination and vaccination certificates. In fact, many are opening new twitter accounts to raise these issues with me. I had discussed this matter in my last open house also, most queries remain the same. Let me summarize the queries that I continue to receive: (1) whether vaccines taken in India is acceptable in Kuwait, particularly whether those with Covishield vaccine certificates are allowed to enter Kuwait? (2) What would happen to someone who has taken a vaccine other than the one approved in Kuwait? (3) Whether the vaccination certificates issued in India are valid in Kuwait? (4) How do we get the vaccination certificates linked with passport? (5) Are we going to put a special vaccination stamp on passports? (6) Does the vaccination

certificates need attestation by any authorities in India? (7) Can someone who has taken his first dose of vaccine outside Kuwait can take the second dose in Kuwait? (8) Can those vaccinated be exempted from PCR test and quarantine?

Let me say this. I have been taking up these issues related to the stranded Indians with the Kuwait authorities at highest level regularly. Today morning also I raised it with the Vice Foreign Minister for Asia Affairs. I have handed over to the Kuwaiti authorities list of Indians who are stranded in India including our medical professionals and who are facing various difficulties including job loss and expiry of residency. I am happy to note that many of our requests have been accepted. This is a work in progress. Of course, there are challenges for all expatriates all over the world including Indian expatriates, and the challenges will continue as Covid 19 pandemic continues to create difficulties. Decisions on each of our requests will be made by Kuwaiti authorities based on their assessment of the evolving Covid 19 pandemic situation in Kuwait and in India. We will continue our requests.

I am happy to inform that we have several updates on these issues. In the last few weeks, the staff of Kuwait's Ministry of Health who were stranded in India are now returning to Kuwait. We have also seen the decision of the Cabinet of the State of Kuwait to allow fully vaccinated expats from August 1. You have seen the notification on this. We will show it in our presentation. But the questions on the vaccine certificates remain. Many are reminding me that Covishield and Astra Zeneca are the same. I know it. I am aware of it. Kuwaiti authorities are aware of it. I myself has taken two doses of Covishield/Oxford/Astra Zeneca.

Let me assure you this. Kuwaiti authorities are fully aware that Covishield vaccine given in India is the same as the Oxford/Astra-Zeneca vaccine. Many with their certificates mentioning only Covishield are also able to successfully register on the MoH portal. However, we are in touch with the authorities in India to ensure that the certificates issued to those wanting to travel abroad need to

mention Oxford/Astra-Zeneca in their certificate; they may also mention batch number and date of vaccination. Hence, there is no confusion whatsoever on the issue. Those who have taken Covishield vaccines in India may register in the Kuwaiti portal as having taken Oxford/Astra Zeneca vaccine.

Let me reiterate. Covishield vaccine given in India is the same as the Oxford/Astra-Zeneca vaccine. Those who have taken Covishield vaccines in India may register in the Kuwaiti portal as having taken Oxford/Astra Zeneca vaccine. Please try to get a certificate from your vaccinating authority with Astra/Zeneca mentioned in it, in addition to Covishield. I cannot be clearer than this. If you still have any issues or confusion please register with us in the Google form that we have circulated yesterday. I have issued a press release on this. I may not be able to send replies to each of the queries that I receive in email, WhatsApp, Facebook and twitter. But, let me assure you, we have a team of officers examining each of the registrations made and issues involved taken up with concerned authorities. There is no need to panic. The situation is very much under control and we will continue to address each of the issues involved. We will have more in the presentation later today.

Let me also clarify that this entry is not currently available to those who have taken Covaxin. We have taken up the issue and will update you as and when we get more information.

Now let me brief you on the visit of Hon'ble External Affairs Minister. EAM called on His Highness Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, Prime Minister of the State of Kuwait. He handed over to him a letter from Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi addressed to His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Amir of the State of Kuwait. EAM thanked the leadership for Kuwait's prompt supply of Liquid Medical Oxygen and other oxygen related supplies to India to fight the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic in India. Both sides discussed the state of bilateral relations and also the developments in the region, which is very important region for us. Kuwait is part of our extended neighborhood.

EAM held delegation level talks with H.E. Sheikh (Dr.) Ahmed Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, Minister of Foreign Affairs. The talks were also attended by H.E. Dr. Abdullah Issa Al Salman, Minister of Commerce and Industry. Both sides reviewed the entire gamut of bilateral relations and exchanged views on the regional developments and global issues. Hon'ble Minister also virtually addressed our diaspora and held an interactive session with the community representatives. I am also particularly happy that during the visit, he gave interviews to all Arabic and English newspapers in Kuwait, to Kuwait TV. I am happy that all the newspapers carried his interviews prominently making our message of India – Kuwait partnership available to every section of Kuwaiti society. I thank my media friends who wholeheartedly support our positive engagement.

During the visit both sides also discussed the challenges posed by the devastating COVID-19 pandemic, the distress it caused to humanity and reiterated their commitment to jointly fight the pandemic and address the myriad of issues that their citizens face such as travel restrictions and issues related to vaccination. The topics covered also included food security, cyber security, cooperation in the energy sector and issues related to the Indian workforce in Kuwait. Both sides agreed to hold the first meeting of the India – Kuwait Joint Commission Meeting later this year and also to set dates for early meetings of the Joint Working Groups on Health, Hydrocarbon and Manpower. The two sides also agreed to set up new Joint Working Groups in other areas of cooperation.

I am happy to update that the JWG on Hydrocarbon was held on June 16. We are now scheduled to hold the JWG on Manpower on July 6. I consider it as an important meeting where we will discuss and review all issues involving the Diaspora including the Engineers accreditation issue and certification issue associated with Indian nurses.

Most of you attended the special briefing session that I held last week to brief you on the MoU for Cooperation on the Recruitment of Domestic Workers, which was signed by me with Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Kuwait H.E. Mr. Majdi Ahmad Al – Dhafiri. As I

briefed you, the new MoU brings the Indian Domestic Workers in Kuwait within the ambit of a legal framework which streamlines their recruitment and provides them with protection of law. It introduces a mandatory Employment Contract which ensures the rights and obligations of both the employer and the Domestic Workers including by endeavoring to establish a mechanism for 24 hours assistance to Domestic Workers. It provides for establishment of a Joint Committee for periodic review and assessment and to follow up the implementation of the MoU which will conduct annual meetings.

I think I will stop here. Let me again highlight that we are continuing with: (i) Registration of Stranded Indians and their families, those who lost their jobs, those who did not get their indemnities; (ii) Free Tele consultations by our Medical Doctors from Indian Doctors Forum; (iii) Food Distribution by Indian Community Support Group (ICSG) and free lunch every day for all distressed Indian workers ; (iv) Special Counters at the Embassy for Registration for Vaccination and now for blood donation data; (v) Vaccine Registration Campaign being undertaken by various Associations; (vi) Registration for vaccines for those without Civil IDs; (vii) Legal Assistance for those in need, with lawyers present physically at Embassy on Saturdays; (viii) Medical Assistance for those in need; and (ix) Covid 19 Awareness campaign in association with organizations like IDF. Our twelve WhatsApp numbers are available for all.

I have also visited our shelters last week, and had lunch with them. Let me share with you, our brothers and sisters are absolutely safe in our shelters. You have seen photos of them participating in International Day of Yoga celebrations. So please do not get misled by those who try to keep our sisters out of our shelters. I am aware of some private shelters run by illegal agents. We are working with Kuwaiti authorities to bring those people before the law. In fact, our MoU on Domestic workers will help us streamline many of these issues.

I am also working on addressing some of the issues related to some of the volunteers and social workers. I have some major concerns,

which we need to streamline. I would like to have a group of sincere volunteers to join hands with the Embassy to help those in need. I will address those issues separately. I need to share one happy news that sixteen of our sailors who were stranded here on Merchant Ship M V Ula have left, Embassy arranged their tickets and also paid all expenses for their medical tests, visa regularization etc. I thank Kuwaiti authorities for the support and cooperation.

Let me conclude by again thanking Kuwaiti authorities for being in the forefront in supporting India during the second wave of the Covid 19 pandemic through supply of Liquid Medical Oxygen. Kuwait was one of the first countries to come forward and offer support to India and Government of Kuwait here emerged as the major supplier of LMO to India. The Embassy received full cooperation and support from the leadership and officials of various Ministries and public authorities. You have also seen how the Kuwait Towers were lit with Indian Tricolor to express solidarity with India. I should also thank the various oxygen producing companies in Kuwait which I visited. They managed to arrange tankers and cylinders in short notice not only from Kuwait but other GCC countries as well. Indian community and friends of India here also came together and led a campaign to send cylinders and tankers to India and to state governments. ICSG, IBPC, IDF, IIM and IIT alumni, ICAI, various associations of engineers, and our many professional and cultural associations and groups came forward collecting oxygen cylinders.

As I said before, what followed during the last few weeks was an unprecedented flow of oxygen from Kuwait to India. As I am speaking to you now, INS Shardul is on the way to India with over 7500 oxygen cylinders arranged by our community here. The air-sea bridge that we established was very effective despite the challenges of cyclone in Arabian Sea. We are organizing an event on June 29, 2021, to express our thanks to all those in Kuwait who joined hands with us in the joint fight against Covid 19 pandemic. All are welcome to join virtually.

Dear Friends,

While we continue to address all concerns related to Covid 19 pandemic, we also continue our celebrations of the 60th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations with Kuwait and also 75th anniversary of our independence, through various events virtually.

You have seen our Hon'ble Minister of External Affairs and His Excellency Foreign Minister of Kuwait jointly launched the yearlong celebrations of the 60th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations. Most of the mainstream media carried that picture of them jointly holding this 60th anniversary logo together. I am happy that most of the Indian associations have started undertaking various activities through online celebrations.

One of the highlights of this month was the 7th International Day of Yoga celebrations which was unique with the personal participation of Hon'ble Minister of Ayush Shri Kiren Rijju, which was attended online by over ten thousand Indians and friends of India in Kuwait. Equally important was the special event we organized on the occasion of the World Blood Donors Day felicitating our Indian Blood Donor heroes. We are the largest blood donors in Kuwait. Some of them were donating more than twenty-five times.

I know I spoke a bit long. But given the fact that we have so much topics to cover, I always end up talking for long.

I will now request my colleague Protector General of Emigrants and Joint Secretary Shri Yogeshwar Sanghwan to say a few words. After which, we will have a presentation by Shri Fahad Suri, First Secretary and Spokesperson of the Embassy. I will be happy to get your suggestions and also answer your questions.

Thank you.