



# COVID-19 IN SINGAPORE: REACHING OUT TO THE SOUTH ASIAN COMMUNITY

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# **COVID-19 in Singapore: Reaching out to the South Asian Community**

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Nithya Subramanian

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# INTRODUCTION

## ROSHNI KAPUR

The outbreak of COVID-19 has had an extreme impact on virtually every country in the world. It is far greater than any other health crisis in recent history. The pandemic has adversely affected societies, communities and economies at their core.

The virus outbreak was first reported in December 2019 when the World Health Organization's (WHO) Country Office in China was notified by the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission about a 'viral pneumonia' in the city. In late January 2020, WHO deployed its first mission to Wuhan, Hubei, to meet the city's public health officials regarding the emerging new cases of the unprecedented virus. By 20 February 2020, the number of COVID-19 cases reached approximately 75,748 worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Less than a month later, the virus had spread at an alarming level and WHO declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic.<sup>2</sup> At the point of writing (22 July 2020), the total number of cases worldwide

exceeded 14.7 million, including about 612,000 deaths.<sup>3</sup>

In Singapore, the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was detected on 23 January 2020 with the arrival of a Chinese national from Wuhan carrying the virus. The first known cluster emerged at the Yong Thai Hang Medical Hall on 4 February 2020. Singapore had taken early precautions and measures to minimise the spread of the virus, including screening all inbound travellers from Wuhan, temperature screening for all incoming passengers and issuing advisories against non-essential travel to Hubei.

On 7 February 2020, the Singapore government decided to raise the DORSCON level from 'Yellow' to 'Orange', along with new precautionary measures, including urging organisers to cancel or postpone non-essential big-scale gatherings; advising workplaces to carry out temperature screenings; and suspending inter-school

1 "Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) Situation Report-31", World Health Organization, 20 February 2020, p. 1.

2 "Timeline of WHO's response to Covid-19", World Health Organization, 30 June 2020. <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/29-06-2020-covidtimeline>. Accessed on 21 July 2020.

3 Ibid.

and external activities until the end of March 2020. Despite these measures, the virus continued to spread quickly, as new clusters were formed and the first two COVID-19-related deaths were reported on 21 March 2020.<sup>4</sup>

An open and highly globalised economy, Singapore is heavily dependent on foreign labour, including migrant workers who are employed in manual jobs such as construction, cleaning and security. These migrant workers, who form the backbone of the process, construction and marine shipyard industries, make up almost a quarter of Singapore's total population of 5.7 million people.<sup>5</sup> Many of these migrant workers come from South Asia, particularly India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The Bangladeshi migrant workers are largely employed in the construction sector while the others work in marine and conservancy services.

The first migrant worker infection in Singapore was reported on 8 February 2020 when a 39-year-old Bangladeshi man working at the Seletar Aerospace Heights construction site caught the virus. A cluster then formed at the worksite followed by new clusters in the migrant workers' dormitories over time. Due to the cramped

living conditions and lack of social distancing, the cases in the dormitories spread at a fast rate. As on 22 July 2020, there were close to 46,000 dormitory cases out of a total of 48,744 infected people in Singapore.<sup>6</sup>

The government established a Joint Task Force on 7 April 2020 which has deployed Support Teams and Forward Assurance to handle the situation in the dormitories.<sup>7</sup> These teams have been working closely with dormitory managers to respond to the workers' needs quickly. They have also assisted in setting up medical facilities, providing sufficient food and medical supplies and overseeing housekeeping and logistics. They even established wi-fi services to ensure that the migrant workers are able to stay in touch with their families and friends back home.<sup>8</sup> They have also conducted rigorous testing and disinfected the existing dormitories.

In an effort to better appreciate the concerns of the South Asian migrant workers and the assistance and support provided by the Singapore government to these workers, and by the different South Asian countries to their nationals in Singapore, the Institute of South Asian Studies conducted interviews in

4 Michael Yong, "Timeline: How the Covid-19 outbreak has evolved in Singapore so far", *Channel NewsAsia*, 18 April 2020. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/singapore-covid-19-outbreak-evolved-coronavirus-deaths-timeline-12639444>. Accessed on 19 June 2020.

5 Rachel Phua and Chew Hui Min, "Can Singapore rely less on foreign workers? It's not just about dollars and cents, says observers", *Channel NewsAsia*, 9 June 2020. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/singapore-foreign-workers-reliance-challenges-12806970>. Accessed on 19 June 2020.

6 "Coronavirus cases in Singapore: What we know so far", *The Straits Times*, 22 July 2020. <https://www.straitstimes.com/multimedia/graphics/2020/02/spore-virus-cases/index.html?shell>. Accessed on 22 July 2020.

7 "Containing Covid-19 spread at foreign worker dormitories", *Gov.sg*, 14 April 2020. <https://www.gov.sg/article/containing-covid-19-spread-at-foreign-worker-dormitories>. Accessed on 20 July 2020.

8 Ibid.



May 2020 with Singapore's Minister for Law and Minister for Home Affairs, Mr K Shanmugam; Bangladesh's High Commissioner to Singapore, HE Md Mustafizur Rahman; India's High Commissioner to Singapore, HE Jawed Ashraf; and Pakistan's High Commissioner to Singapore, HE Rukhsana Afzaal.

This Special Report is a compilation of these interviews. It underscores the strong and proactive measures adopted by the Singapore government to contain and combat the outbreak among the migrant workers. While touching on the COVID-19 Temporary Measures Bill, it shares the concern of the government on the spread of fake news and xenophobia on social media relating to the situation with the migrant worker community. The report also highlights how the different South Asian missions in Singapore have been working with the Singapore government and the relevant agencies to address the concerns of their nationals, including migrant workers. The interviews also emphasise the strong ties between Singapore and the South Asian states, which have been reaffirmed during this pandemic and are likely to be further enhanced in the post-pandemic era.



## INTERVIEW WITH MR K SHANMUGAM

Minister for Law and Minister for Home Affairs, Singapore

### The Singapore Experience: Displaying Humanity and Compassion

*Singapore has been effectively handling the COVID-19 pandemic by curbing its spread in the local community as well as looking after its foreign workers. The government is not just providing its guest workers with free medical treatment but is also paying their wages, arranging for three meals and free wifi connectivity. According to Singapore's Minister for Law and Minister for Home Affairs, Mr K Shanmugam, very few countries are adopting such measures for their migrant communities.*

**The COVID-19 outbreak has affected many workers from South Asia. The Singapore government has taken strong and proactive steps to contain and combat the outbreak among them. Can you please tell us more about the measures taken so far?**

**K Shanmugam:** The workers live in communal-style accommodation. The spread of infections among Singaporeans usually happens in the home and the office, when individuals come in contact with infected persons. In communal living, very often, six to ten men, sometimes even 12 or more, live together in a room. They cook, eat and interact with one another,

which leads to a tremendous increase in the velocity of the spread of COVID-19.

We have over 100,000 workers living in public dormitories. We also have others in factory-converted dormitories and private residential properties, though there is a limit on how many can live in a specific room. Given this, the spread has been quite quick because this particular virus spreads very fast. When we saw the spread, we moved in and put in place a number of measures to lock down the parts of the dormitories and other areas where there was a spread, at least to protect the other workers who were not infected. It has only been partially successful because, despite our best efforts, they do meet and commune. And this is understandable.

In terms of dealing with the issue, there are three aspects. The workers need to know that they will be taken care of, and we do so in a number of ways.

First, those who need medical attention get the necessary treatment, and they know that there will be no compromise on quality. Those who do not need medical

treatment are put in isolation. So, there are a number of facilities that we have created – community care facilities and recovery facilities. Those who are swabbed are also isolated in swab isolation facilities. We have had to create tens of thousands of such spaces in a very short time frame. The Joint Task Force has been focused and has taken care of this.

The workers are aware of the situation and, of course, they are concerned that they might get infected. They know that a vast majority of them actually do not show any symptoms. In fact, one of the reasons the numbers have been high is because we are testing people without any symptoms and isolating them as required. That does not happen in most other countries. We have tested more than 30,000 of them (as on 15 May 2020), and the intention eventually is that when they start moving around and working in the community, we need to ensure that all of them have been tested and cleared.

The second is financial. They are here to work and support their families. We, the government, have done what we can in terms of waiving the foreign workers' levy, which works out to almost US\$900 (S\$1,252) per worker. Companies are expected to pass this benefit to the workers. We do not direct it, but most companies will do their part. Some businesses are themselves in difficulty in this economic situation, resulting in job losses and serious cash flow problems. The government has put in a lot of money to alleviate the problems by repaying

the companies the foreign workers' levy they have paid so that they are not cash-strapped. The banks are stepping in to try and make sure that the workers can digitally transfer money to their families back in India, Bangladesh or other places.

The third aspect is they do not have work. However, they are still receiving a salary. I do not think many countries are doing this for their guest workers, whether in Asia or the West. Since they are sitting in their dormitories or in places of residence, what do they do about their food? As they cannot go out and buy it themselves, it has been a fairly substantive logistical challenge because we are talking about hundreds of thousands of meals every single day. I think, within the first few weeks, over 10 million meals were delivered to the workers. We have put together restaurants where meals are being cooked and delivered free of charge.

So, the workers' medical needs, salaries and food – the basic aspects – have been taken care of. These are the things that kept us pretty focused with the Joint Task Force spearheading these initiatives.

**How has the mood been amongst the workers? How are they holding up and are they satisfied with the government's initiatives?**

**K Shanmugam:** Our survey shows that there is no one uniform answer. However, we know that there is a significant majority and I think we are looking at something like 70 per cent are either satisfied or very

satisfied with the arrangements. Many of them usually renew their contracts. This is a place they want to stay and work. They earn an income, which is more than many professionals do back home. And they know there is a framework of the rule of law. So, their main concern is whether they will have a job after this pandemic is over. Unfortunately, the government does not have a definite answer at the moment. It depends on the companies, the private sector, the state of the economy and many other factors. However, in terms of their current arrangements, a significant majority say they are either satisfied or very satisfied.

We have also taken steps to keep them entertained during the Circuit Breaker. They have been given free wifi and SIM cards to stay in touch with their families back home. They are also given the option of viewing movies on their phones or watching entertainment that is piped in. However, they are still, of course, confined to a room with a few co-workers to provide company. Sadly, there is no place for them to go; it is not an easy situation.

**The government has also recently instituted the COVID-19 Temporary Measures Bill. Can you please share more about the bill and its benefits?**

**K Shanmugam:** It has become an Act as it has been passed in the Parliament and is in force. The main approach to it was that this COVID-19 health crisis is not something anyone could have planned for or predicted. Many people have been

caught off-guard by its outbreak. Often, in the commercial context, the government directs that businesses stop and work places close down, especially during the Circuit Breaker. There is no way one can do business under the current situation. As such, it is only fair that those with very substantive cash flow issues are given time to pay off their dues. Primarily, we have focused on sectors like construction. Usually, the contractor would have to pay liquidated damages if there is a delay. However, in this context, he cannot get the workers. Of course, there will be a delay. Should he pay the liquidated damages? We are intervening to try to help. Many commercial tenants do not have any business at this point in time. As such, how can they pay? Is it fair for them to be required to pay the rent immediately? We have given them time to pay their rents.

The government also waived property tax on a few months' rental for commercial tenants, retail, the food and beverage sector and so on, and the landlords are required by law to pass the property tax rebates on to the tenants. So that gives them a month off. I know that many landlords have made their own arrangements to give further waivers because there is no business right now. It does not make sense to chase after money and force businesses to close down. So, this bill covers a number of sectors, but broadly what I have explained is the spirit behind its enactment.

The government has also gazetted another set of rules where people, mainly

homebuyers who have agreed to purchase a property and put some money down but are now unable to proceed, would be given some more time to rethink their decision. Their deposits will not be forfeited during this period. So we are trying to help people during this period.

**Another concern of the government is the spread of fake news and xenophobia on social media. A video of a migrant worker who hanged himself was in circulation, but it was not of an incident in Singapore. Would you like to share your thoughts on this?**

**K Shanmugam:** I have already expressed my views quite strongly. Shortly before I spoke, I noticed a spate of videos and articles targetting foreign workers to make them angry. It could have instigated them to express their anger and could have easily become a flashpoint. We have over a hundred thousand men who do not have work and are in a state of anxiety. Then a video is circulated suggesting somebody has hanged himself in Singapore. Old photos of food that are said to be substandard are circulated, when a huge number of meals are delivered everyday. We know that the photos were taken earlier and were being re-circulated to try and make people angry and give the impression that the workers are unhappy.

As a result, I made a statement saying that we are watching this very carefully. We will move in and deal with it, if necessary. Since my statement, the amount of fake news has come down. However, we will not

hesitate to take action where deliberate falsehoods are circulated to create tension or incite violence.

**Finally, what is your message to Singaporeans in their treatment and behaviour towards migrant workers, particularly during this pandemic?**

**K Shanmugam:** The prime minister and other ministers have already spoken about this. Essentially, the workers are aware of their situation in Singapore. It is a situation where they assess that it is to their benefit to be in Singapore. They know the terms. Many of them, as I said, renew their contracts. By law, housing facilities are provided. While the new dormitories meet the recent standards set by this law, there are some older ones which need to improve. The workers know their living conditions and their salaries. Many of them choose to renew their contracts because Singapore offers a better prospect to them. It is a safer prospect compared to almost any other country.

On our part, we have to recognise the substantive assistance they are providing to us in Singapore. Our public housing, where more than 80 per cent of our population lives, and other places like condominiums, infrastructure projects and jobs like cleaning, which are not taken up by the locals, are being done by these migrant workers. We have to see how we can be more productive, use more technology and have fewer foreign workers. This is something that has been talked about for a long time, and we have slowly been

looking at sectors where we can reduce the number of migrant workers. Nevertheless, these workers do play a substantive part in our development. I think we need to be thankful and this should be reflected in the way we treat them as well. They are part and parcel of what Singapore is today. All of us are human beings and we have to push this with a spirit of humanity.





## INTERVIEW WITH HE MD MUSTAFIZUR RAHMAN

High Commissioner of Bangladesh to Singapore

### The Bangladeshi Migrant Workers: A Key Concern

*There are a significant number of Bangladeshis living and working in Singapore with a large majority being migrant workers. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected this group in a big way. Bangladesh's High Commissioner to Singapore, HE Mohammed Mustafizur Rahman, and his officials at the mission have taken many steps to help the Bangladesh community. He has also praised the Singapore government in its efforts to combat this outbreak.*

**Has the COVID-19 pandemic left a number of Bangladeshis stranded here? Can you please tell us about the support that the Bangladesh High Commission in Singapore is offering to them?**

**Md Mustafizur Rahman:** Singapore is a popular destination for Bangladeshis. Apart from our migrant workers who are making significant contributions to this beautiful city-state, we also have individuals coming here for medical treatment, tourism, education and other official businesses. Some of these people were stuck in Singapore due to a travel embargo at both ends. There were also

some Singaporeans stranded in Dhaka. We worked with the Singapore authorities for evacuation on both sides. A special Singapore Airlines flight operated between Singapore and Dhaka in April 2020. As on 11 May 2020, approximately 200 individuals had been sent back to Dhaka from Singapore. Now, we are working on a second flight as there are still some people stranded for various reasons, including medical treatment.

**Another big group that has been affected are the Bangladeshi migrant workers in Singapore. The Singapore government has been working very hard in taking care of them and providing them with treatment. How is the Bangladesh High Commission in Singapore collaborating with the Singapore agencies to help this group of people?**

**Md Mustafizur Rahman:** During the initial period of the COVID-19 outbreak, only five Bangladeshi migrant workers were infected by the virus. All of them, except one, fully recovered and went back to work. Then, a sudden outburst of infections took place in the middle of March 2020. The rise

was rather alarming and there were four deaths.

Our main priority has been to see that the infected workers are treated and that they get well and return to normal life. The same applies to those who have been under quarantine or in isolation. We are very pleased that the Singapore government is doing everything possible to help the migrant workers. We are happy with the way it is handling the outbreak in the dormitories, detecting the infection and mitigating the spread among the workers. It is also looking after the workers' needs and providing them with much-needed support. It is a massive task but the Singapore authorities are doing it very efficiently, especially since the deployment of the Joint Task Force and the provision of medical needs in the dormitories. This is really phenomenal and I really appreciate the Singapore government for that.

On our part, we are in constant touch with the relevant authorities here, particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Manpower (MOM) and the dormitory operators. There is a sense of anxiety among our workers due to the high prevalence of infection in the dormitories. We are trying to cheer them up through telephone calls, Facebook and websites, and even through video messages from me. We are urging them to abide by the Singapore government's instructions, maintain personal hygiene and practice social distancing, among other things. We are also responding to their needs either directly or through the MOM

and dormitory operators. In short, we are working very closely with the Singapore authorities and will continue to do so until we come out of this crisis.

**Are there any specific concerns that you have encountered? What are some of the problems the workers face and how are you helping them overcome these problems?**

**Md Mustafizur Rahman:** Our workers are generally okay. The first challenge they faced was their encounter with the frontline medical team. Most of them cannot speak English well. As such, they could not express their health concerns to the doctors. It was a challenge for the doctors too. We then appointed Bengali-speaking interpreters to help in the communication process. Fortunately, we have some Bangladeshi and Bengali-speaking doctors serving in Singapore who also provided the necessary support. Also, the Bangladeshi diaspora arranged for volunteers to help with the interpretation.

A Bangladeshi-born National University of Singapore medical graduate developed a translation portal for use by the doctors and this was appreciated by the medical community. On our part, we are rendering our full support to all these initiatives.

The second issue is of the workers worrying about their salaries, food and remitting money to their families back home in Bangladesh. We are grateful to the Singapore authorities for assuring the migrant workers that they will be paid, fed

and well-treated. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in a televised address, reiterated this commitment. He also wrote to our prime minister on this matter, stating that Singapore will do everything to take care of our workers here. Other leaders have also assured us from time to time. The generosity of Singapore is well-appreciated by our government back home.

### **How are the workers holding up?**

**Md Mustafizur Rahman:** Some of our workers have expressed concern about the type of food being served to them. This is not about the quality of food. Rather, they miss their own taste and cooking. The MOM has asked for a list of Bangladeshi caterers in Singapore, which we have done. Given the nature of the virus and the restrictions on access to the dormitories, we cannot directly help them, so we go through the MOM.

During the month of Ramadan, our workers missed certain items they usually eat during *Iftar*, so we have requested the MOM to allow us to deliver some food to our workers. Our workers also raised the issue of remitting money to their families. That too has been resolved.

In all, we are thoroughly engaged with the Singapore authorities and in contact with our migrant workers all the time.

**Singapore's Foreign Minister, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, had a telephonic conversation with his counterpart in Bangladesh, Dr Abdul Momen, on the**

**voluntary repatriation of some of the migrant workers. Can you please tell us more about this?**

**Md Mustafizur Rahman:** As far as I know, it was a courtesy call from the Singapore foreign minister. Dr Balakrishnan briefed our foreign minister about the situation with our migrant workers and Singapore's assistance for them. Dr Momen expressed his gratitude for the generosity of Singapore in taking care of our workers during this difficult time. I am not sure if they discussed the repatriation of the migrant workers. What I know is that there are some Bangladeshi workers whose work permits have expired and they are due to return home. However, they are not able to do so due to the travel embargo. These numbers are not so large. Some have returned by special flights, and we will certainly facilitate the necessary arrangements for the remaining who wish to return home.

The most important thing here is that Singapore and Bangladesh have warm and cordial relations, and it is during moments of a crisis that such friendships are tested. I think that both our authorities understand each other's concerns and challenges. We are working together to help each other. In my view, Singapore requires workers from Bangladesh. Despite the economic uncertainties, Singapore's construction sector wants to resume activities as soon as possible following the Circuit Breaker. As most of our workers are employed in the construction sector, they will very much be needed.

**Amidst all this gloomy news, there was the heartening news of a Bangladeshi worker coming out of the intensive care unit, and his wife having a healthy child back home. Would you like to comment on this?**

**Md Mustafizur Rahman:** This is an example of human bonding, compassion and solidarity. It is an emotional story of a man struggling for life while his wife was expecting a baby, and the baby being born while the father remained unconscious in the hospital. This is pretty touching. Regardless of race, religion and ethnicity, everyone in Singapore and Bangladesh was praying for his recovery. We are very happy to see him recover. It is an incredible medical success. At some point, we were losing hope, but the doctors did not give up and continued to do their best for him.

I would like to express my deep admiration for the Singapore health system and for the doctors who treated him. We have no words to express our gratitude to them. We are thankful to the government of Singapore for bearing the cost of his treatment; this is a remarkable gesture. We hope that he will go home to see his lovely little angel, then come back again to work here, earn his living and contribute to Singapore, and in that way, repay his debt to this country.

## INTERVIEW WITH HE JAWED ASHRAF

High Commissioner of India to Singapore

### India and Singapore: Emerging Even Stronger Partners

*The COVID-19 pandemic has affected more than 4,800 Indian nationals in Singapore, with a majority of them being migrant workers living in dormitories across the island. HE Jawed Ashraf, India's High Commissioner to Singapore, elaborated on the help being provided not just to individuals affected by COVID-19 but also to Indians stranded in Singapore. He also said that since the launch of the 'Vande Bharat Mission', over 4,000 Indian nationals have been repatriated back to India (as on 5 May 2020).*

**The COVID-19 pandemic has left many Indians stranded in Singapore. Can you please tell us about the support being provided by the Indian High Commission in Singapore and the steps being taken to help them go home?**

**Jawed Ashraf:** For us here in Singapore, as in India and the rest of the world, the situation is quite unprecedented. Just before the lockdown in India on 24 March 2020, we suspended international flights and prohibited the return of all passengers, including Indians from abroad. Our first task really was around 22-23 March 2020

when about 125 Indians returning from the Philippines and Malaysia were stranded at Changi Airport. They could not enter India because they were coming from two countries that were on the prohibited list. It took a great deal of effort for us to get them back to India. Apart from seeking special permission from the Indian government, for two days, several officers and staff at the Changi Airport looked after them, helping them with food and other conveniences.

Since then, we anticipated that there was going to be a large number of stranded Indians here. As such, we focused on communications. We opened three help-lines, and our staff are constantly on e-mail and phones communicating with people. We set up a web page where people could register themselves, along with details of their destination in India. We also used social media to communicate with them. By staying in regular touch with the Singapore government, we are also taking care of visa extensions and/or other kinds of stay permits which will enable the stranded Indians to continue to be here.

We have been providing accommodation and food to a large number of stranded Indians, and in many cases, medical support. These are mainly short-term visitors – tourists, business travellers and family visitors.

There are a large number of students who have either finished their courses or are unable to continue to sustain themselves here. We have made arrangements for these students and stranded tourists by either getting restaurants to deliver food to their places of residence or arranging for dry rations.

There have also been cases of students complaining of depression, isolation, uncertainty and anxiety. We regularly speak to them and their parents to reassure them. We have also appointed two trained professional counsellors to help those in need.

We have also had some very tragic situations. There have been nine deaths of Indians who came here for treatment. We had to arrange for their last rites – burial or cremation, as the case may be. The Singapore government was helpful and supportive in granting permissions relatively quickly.

There are also a large number of people who have been laid off and want to return to India. And of course, there are foreign workers too!

**The migrant workers are a very big group that is affected by the COVID-19 outbreak**

**in Singapore. How are you working with the Singapore government to help them?**

**Jawed Ashraf:** The Singapore government has been very aggressive and proactive in addressing the issues arising out of the spiralling number of cases in the dormitories and also amongst workers who live outside the dormitories. Prime Minister Lee (Hsien Loong) has repeatedly said that Singapore will treat the foreign workers as it would treat its own citizens, and we deeply appreciate it. This was also conveyed to Prime Minister Narendra Modi when they spoke over the phone recently.

The migrant workers have been assured full salaries, three meals a day and proper medical support. They have even been given wi-fi and conveniences like masks and sanitisers. I think our job really is to support the commendable efforts of the Singapore government.

I have been to the dormitories with Mr S Iswaran (Minister for Communications and Information) and Mr Zaqy Mohamad (Minister of State for National Development and Manpower). My Consular colleagues have been there as well. I sent a video message which was dubbed in Tamil to the workers and then a New Year's greeting. We are working with the Singapore government to get some of the icons of Indian cinema and cricket to send messages of reassurance and comfort to the workers.

I have to say that the sense of compassion that is prevalent in Singapore's society has

come to the fore again as we see a large number of organisations and individuals coming forward to support the workers in a variety of ways. Some have been offering food while others have been extending financial support to workers who have been laid off. For example, the Abdul Kalam Vision Society collected money for one of the deceased workers and sent it to his family in India. Then, there are those who have created innovative tools and platforms. For example, there is a platform called 'KNOW' which some of the dormitory managers are using as a tool to communicate in various languages. We see platforms like Dei curating a convenience package for S\$15 to be given to foreign workers.

The Little India Shopkeepers and Heritage Association is supporting thousands of people, particularly those who are observing fasting during the month of Ramadan, by providing food to break their fast. The Global India International School and its foundation, the Global Indian Foundation, donated a large sum of money, working through the Citizens Consultative Committee and other organisations.

All of us are rallying together, and this is where one sees the spirit of Singapore coming forth and reaching out to help one another.

### **How else is Singapore contributing to India's fight against the Coronavirus?**

**Jawed Ashraf:** Singapore has supported India in its fight against the pandemic. The

Temasek Foundation has donated test kits for 70,000 tests. These are Fortitude Kit 2.0 tests which have been developed by A\*STAR. In addition, 30,000 kits have been sent through the Bill Gates and Melinda Gates Foundation. In total, kits to conduct 100,000 tests have gone to India.

We have also been working with Singapore to support the needs over here. For example, there was a large quantity of medical supplies which Singapore wanted from India that was subsequently frozen due to an export ban on those items. These included five million masks and raw material to make masks as well as about 1.4 million bottles of 500 millilitres sanitisers. We helped to get the permission for Singapore for the release and export of these items.

Singapore had also requested for the supply of 2.5 million tablets of hydroxychloroquine, which is in great demand around the world. We arranged for these as well.

In addition, we are working together to ensure that the supply lines remain open, especially for critical food items. For example, India is a major source of rice for Singapore. We are working closely with the Singapore Ministry of Trade and Industry and Indian agencies to ensure that, despite these lockdown conditions in India that have disrupted the supply chains, we can facilitate the exports of food items, including fruits and vegetables.



This is the time when both India and Singapore are coming together to help each other and to address each other's needs and concerns in ways that two good friends should.

### **How do you think this relationship will evolve post-pandemic?**

**Jawed Ashraf:** During the warm conversation between the two prime ministers, they agreed to work together, not just during the pandemic but later as well. There are a number of areas in which we can work together.

The relationship between India and Singapore is filled with much goodwill, mutual respect and confidence in each other. I think this is one relationship which is free from contests and claims, doubts and hesitations. So, the only thing we have to do is to really look ahead, to continue to build this relationship and take it to a higher level.

I think the post-pandemic situation will present many opportunities. Both sides recognise that as the supply chains adjust, as each country looks at diversifying and increasing resilience, we will see enormous trading opportunities there. We are already thinking of the ways in which we can support each other, develop and make our economies more resilient, both in terms of internal and external trade. However, I believe there will be great opportunities for investment as both countries rebuild and re-energise our economies.

One area that has come to the fore, and is a priority for both countries in the last three years, is digitalisation. India has done extremely well with its digital-governance model based on the *Aadhaar* platform. Singapore is developing as a smart nation. We can work together not just for ourselves but also to offer solutions to this region and the rest of the world. This is one important area where our two prime ministers would like to focus on.

Going forward, I think we have an important responsibility to the region and the world. Retreating into ourselves is not an option. We have to make sure that trade, investment, travel, technologies, etc., continue to flow across the borders. We have to be sure that while globalisation will face a lot of headwinds, we do not start erecting walls against one another. We must ensure that the international economy remains open, even as countries build more resilience into their own economies.

There is also a correlation in multilateral forums, the G20, in particular, to coordinate monetary and fiscal policies, as well as opening up of international travel in a way that we can reinforce the growth impulses and recovery in the economy.

Similarly, debt relief and relief for the poorer countries and the weaker sections of society will be an important responsibility for world leaders. We will have to refocus and repurpose globalisation, not just in terms of trade and investment, but also on working together



on healthcare, education, livelihoods and a greater degree of inclusion in the world. I think we will have to work towards reforming multilateralism.

In this grave crisis, we have seen multilateralism falling short. Multilateral institutions, including the World Health Organization, fell short. So, how do we make multilateral institutions stronger, more responsive and more inclusive, and give a voice to the weak? And how do we prepare ourselves for future pandemics and disasters so that there is a concerted response globally?

Climate change is also an important area we need to focus on, and we have just seen how quickly nature recovers and heals itself at a time when we have stopped doing many things now. Prime Minister Modi spoke about this even in 2014 in his maiden address to the United Nations that the change in lifestyle will be an important aspect to reverse climate change and destruction of nature.

Then, there is geopolitics. This is not going to be a world in which states are likely to be kinder to one another. We are already seeing the first signs of geopolitical competition. There is a degree of bitterness and a greater sense of competitiveness. I expect competition will certainly be stronger and harsher. The West itself has taken the big blow from this pandemic and obviously wants to respond to that as well. Without going into the merits of competing claims on governance and economic models, we are entering difficult

and somewhat troubled waters in terms of geopolitics. Now, how do we, particularly this region, avoid a downward spiral and its worst consequences? This is going to be an important responsibility that all of us share.

Singapore and India have a great meeting of minds on this issue, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region – the need to avoid the region being torn apart in great power rivalry and for us to find common grounds to work towards a more stable and cooperative order. This is again something on which we will work with Singapore and with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations-member states and other partners. So, yes, there is a good and long agenda for us.



## INTERVIEW WITH HE RUKHSANA AFZAAL

High Commissioner of Pakistan to Singapore

### Singapore and Pakistan: Working and Tracing Together

*Like many other countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a great toll on Pakistan. While the number of nationals living in Singapore are relatively small compared to the Middle East, they have, nevertheless, contributed significantly to their country's fight by raising funds and sending medical equipment to Pakistan. HE Rukhsana Afzaal, Pakistan's High Commissioner to Singapore, shared her views on the impact of COVID-19 on Pakistanis here and on Singapore sharing the code for its 'TraceTogether' app to help Pakistan combat the pandemic.*

**Has the COVID-19 pandemic left Pakistani nationals stranded in Singapore? If so, can you please tell us about the support that has been provided by the Pakistan High Commission here to them?**

**Rukhsana Afzaal:** Like many countries in the world, Pakistan was also not prepared for the COVID-19 outbreak. When it suddenly erupted, more than 90 per cent of cases in Pakistan were imported. However, unlike Singapore, we were not well-equipped. There were no thermal scanners at the airports or isolation or

quarantine centres and test kits were not available in large numbers. We are a country of 220 million people, so it became very challenging for the government to contain the spread of this virus, which is highly transmissible. The first step that the government took, among many others, was the closure of the airspace of Pakistan until we had the necessary equipment to conduct tests and scanning, and implement the necessary measures at the airport. As a result, thousands of Pakistanis were stranded abroad.

There were about 78 Pakistanis in Singapore, people who were either tourists or were transiting through the country. Some were businessmen, and there were also a few Pakistanis who came here for medical treatment. It became a big challenge to repatriate them because there were no direct flights between Pakistan and Singapore. Some Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) flights were operating to neighbouring countries, but getting a transit visa for these Pakistani travellers and conducting the COVID-19 test was a big challenge. So, we immediately took it up with our own government, PIA and the

governments of Singapore and Malaysia. I am very glad to say that we received so much support and understanding from both these countries. PIA operated two special flights to Kuala Lumpur in April 2020. These Pakistani passengers were exempted from COVID-19 tests and we also got permission for them to transit through Kuala Lumpur.

The Singapore government supported us because many of our people had overstayed their visa. Singapore Airlines also supported us by flying the stranded passengers in two batches to Kuala Lumpur. In total, 78 Pakistanis have been evacuated from Singapore and 38 Singaporeans were evacuated from Pakistan to Singapore on the same special flight. We are preparing to send another batch of 53 Pakistanis who are currently stranded in Singapore (as on 12 May 2020).

This is a very unusual time and demands unusual and unprecedented cooperation and support among countries. If this spirit prevails, I think we will be happy.

**While a large number of the COVID-19 cases in Singapore involve Indian and Bangladeshi workers, are there any Pakistani workers living in the dormitories?**

**Rukhsana Afzaal:** We do not have blue-collar workers in Singapore. Most of these workers are in the Gulf countries. We have about five million of them in the Middle East. Fortunately, in Singapore, we have Pakistani executives in banking, finance,

telecommunications and information technology. So, we do not have any such cases here.

**Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Singapore's Foreign Minister, spoke to his counterpart in Pakistan, Mr Shah Mehmood Qureshi, and the latter evinced interest in the 'TraceTogether' app. Has there been any progress on that and how are the two countries working together to combat this pandemic?**

**Rukhsana Afzaal:** Prime Minister Imran Khan has been following the developments in Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and other such countries which have had success stories in their battle against COVID-19. In this success story, the 'TraceTogether' app has been an important component. So, we were approached by the National Information Technology Board (NITB) in Pakistan with the request to get the code for the 'TraceTogether' app from Singapore's Ministry of Health. I am really grateful that the ministry shared it with us, which we passed to the NITB. Now, the NITB is adapting the app to Pakistan's requirements. We have a very large number of mobile phone users, with 36 per cent Internet penetration. I really hope that this app will help us to do contact tracing and contain the spread of this contagion.

**Another important point raised by Mr Qureshi was Prime Minister Khan's call for debt relief and restructuring to help developing countries create fiscal space and shore up economies during this tough**

**period. How are Singapore and Pakistan working on this?**

**Rukhsana Afzaal:** Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the world's gross domestic product has already shrunk by 10 per cent. According to analysts, the economic impact of this virus is going to be worse than the Great Depression.

This is going to be a very big challenge for developing countries where millions of people are likely to lose their jobs. Rich countries have pumped billions of dollars to keep their economies and businesses afloat. Countries like Pakistan cannot afford to do that. As a result, Prime Minister Khan had made this call to the world leaders, the United Nations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. It is called the 'Global Initiative for Debt Relief', through which the developing countries may be helped and their debt repayment may be rescheduled to give them some fiscal space. I am very glad that we received so much support from these institutions and much understanding from partner countries like Singapore, as billions of dollars have been rescheduled for the developing world. We are really grateful for that.

**The Pakistani community here has also been very proactive in helping its citizens back home. Can you please share more about that?**

**Rukhsana Afzaal:** We have a very proactive and supportive diaspora here in Singapore. When the initial cases of COVID-19

were reported in Pakistan, there was a lot of concern here that our healthcare system was not geared to deal with such a challenge. We received a request from the Pakistan government to engage the diaspora and to procure medical equipment with the funds raised locally. The equipment was exported to Pakistan, as there was acute shortage of medical equipment all over the world. I am very grateful to our community for joining hands in this endeavour. We gave them a list of priority items required in Pakistan on an immediate basis. They raised funds and procured personal protective equipments worth S\$170,000. These were sent in two consignments and handed over to National Disaster Management Authority of Pakistan. Our medical professionals and healthcare staff in Pakistani hospitals are using them.

## ABOUT THE EDITOR

# NITHYA SUBRAMANIAN

Ms Nithya Subramanian manages research papers, publications, social media initiatives and podcasts at the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore. She also provides editorial support for the website.

Ms Subramanian has over 15 years of media experience in Singapore and India, with expertise in the financial sector. She was a journalist with *The Hindu Business Line* and *The Telegraph* in New Delhi and covered capital markets, banking and insurance, trade and commerce, health, media and advertising. As a journalist, she also tracked government policy changes and corporate developments. Prior to joining ISAS, Ms Subramanian was the Deputy Editor of India Se Media, a Singapore-based media company.

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