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Title: The Minister of External Affairs laid a statement regarding attacks on Indians in Australia.

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI S.M. KRISHNA): Madam Speaker, I lay on the Table of the House a statement on "Attacks on Indians in Australia" and the steps being taken by Government of India as well as by the Australian Government in dealing with various issues involved.

The attacks on Indian students have been coming to our notice for over two years now, since 2007 when some students were assaulted in Sydney. In 2008 and 2009 also, there were other sporadic instances of assaults on Indian students, including some working as taxi drivers in Melbourne and in Adelaide. However, it is since May 2009 that there seems to have been a significant increase in the number and frequency of attacks on Indians in Australia. This has coincided with the substantial increase in the number of Indian students studying in Australia over the last three years, with a 141% increase recorded in just two years from 2006 to 2008.

The attacks continued in a sporadic manner till May, 2009. On 9 May, a student named Saurabh Sharma was attacked in a train by a gang of 4-5 people. On 23 May, 2009, a young student studying in Melbourne, Sravan Kumar Theerthala was savagely attacked with a screw driver, resulting in serious injuries to his head. On 2nd January 2010, a student Mr. Nitin Garg was attacked late at night while crossing a park in a Melbourne suburb on his way to work. He later died in the hospital. While there were other cases of assaults on Indian students and taxi drivers in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, most of the incidents seem to have been occurring in and around Melbourne. On 14th January, 2010 night there was an incident of arson by fire in Cranbourne Nanaksar Taath Gurudwara in Melbourne. These attacks received extensive coverage in the media in both countries.

Each assault was taken up with the Australian authorities, at the state level by the Consulates General and at the state and federal levels by the High Commission of India.

The incidents relating to Indian students and nationals in Australia have involved one or more of the following elements: robbery, assault, violence fuelled by alcohol/drugs, juvenile crime and racial abuse. Other contributing factors have been: the financial constraints of the Indian students which have led to them living in poor neighbourhoods, working late hours and travelling in late night public transport, all of which have made them more vulnerable to street crime which has been on the increase in Melbourne, where most of the incidents have taken place.

The profile of the attackers in most of these assaults is of youngsters in their teens and early 20s, largely under the influence of drugs or alcohol. The attackers are of mixed ethnicity, including sometimes, other Indians. Some of the attacks have had racial elements.

Besides the obvious law and order problem, the other issues which have come to the fore include the commercialisation of the Australian international education industry and laxity in monitoring/enforcing compliance of the regulations by the Australian authorities. The increase in number of students in Vocational Education & Training (VET) sector was linked to the immigration system of Australia which gave priority in the last few years to applicants for permanent residency (PR) in certain skills where there are significant shortages. These immigration rules are now in the process of undergoing changes.

The matter of the growing number of assaults on Indian students was taken up in May-June, 2009 at the highest level by Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh with Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and by me with Foreign Minister Stephen Smith.

I visited Australia in August 2009 and conveyed our concerns to Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Foreign Minister Stephen Smith. In the course of my 4 day visit covering three states, and my several interactions with our students and our community in Australia, I gained a first hand perspective on the issues related to the welfare and well-being of our student and larger community in Australia.

In the course of my visit, I announced that the High Commission, the Consulates and the Honorary Consuls would be open on every Friday, from 11 am till 5 pm, for any Indian student to walk in to discuss their problems and grievances.

Ministry of External Affairs and the High Commission have also unveiled since 12 June 2009, on their respective websites, Guidelines for Indian students studying in and wishing to study in Australia with advice, dos and don'ts. These Guidelines have been regularly updated.

Bilateral working groups have discussed the issues of regulation of education agents, student welfare, vocational education

and training, and quality assurance in Delhi in October 2009 and will meet again soon.

During the visit of Prime Minister Mr. Kevin Rudd to India on 12 November 2009, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh conveyed the high priority that Government of India attached to the safety, security and well-being of Indian community in Australia. Mr Rudd reiterated the Australian Government's commitment to taking all possible measures to protect the safety and welfare of all international students including Indian students.

Our High Commission in Australia and the Consulates General in Melbourne and Sydney each have a Community Welfare and Student Liaison Officer (CWSLO) who is on call 24/7, and whose mobile number is on our website as our emergency response number. Any problem involving an Indian student or member of the community is handled by the CWSLO in coordination with the High Commissioner/Consuls General.

In Australia a Task Force headed by the Australian National Security Advisor was set up in the office of Australian Prime Minister, to formulate what they term a 'whole of government' approach to the issue and liaise with state governments on the action being taken by them.

In Melbourne as well as in Sydney, the police have increased patrolling where incidents had occurred. In Melbourne, police presence was stepped up especially around train stations and high crime neighbourhoods; the number of transit police, including in plain clothes on late night trains taken by students, was increased; the Victoria State Government's Robbery Taskforce was doubled; several offenders were charged. A Community Reference Group for Western Melbourne involving the police and members of the Indian community to facilitate communication on safety issues was established. A hotline was set up for Indian students. Free legal advice and referral for international students was made available at Melbourne. More street lighting and CCTV cameras have been provided in areas that are prone to such attacks.

Of the various reports and reviews commissioned by the Australian government to look into the several problems being faced by the students, two have submitted their reports, and made specific recommendations to improve conditions for international students.

There have been 8 Ministerial level visits from Australia to India in 2009. Many of these were focussed on addressing our growing concerns about the safety and well-being of our students.

The Australian federal and state government authorities have taken action in providing relief to Indian students affected due to the sudden closure of certain colleges, in making them aware of their rights and relocating them in other colleges.

Following some attacks on Indian taxi drivers last year, the South Australia government has set up a taxi council to hold regular discussions with taxi drivers, many of whom are students.

The Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) has introduced measures to strengthen checks on student visa applications to stamp out fraud and ensure that students have the financial capacity to live and study in Australia. DIAC has recently announced an overhaul of the general skilled migration rules leading to permanent residency in Australia.

The Victorian Government strengthened the Victorian Sentencing Act 1991 in December 2009, and is conducting a review of the justice system under a retired Supreme Court judge to address racial crime.

As a result of these measures, the number of incidents recorded in these suburbs has decreased. 300 police officers are being added to the Victorian Police to form a rapid response unit to address continued attacks. Other concrete measures taken by the Victorian government include the setting up of an International Student Care Service. The service has 24/7 hotline staffed by trained persons, some of whom also speak Hindi. The Centre provides psychological counselling, legal assistance, assistance with any problem with educational institute, employer or landlord or any other authority. It also provides financial assistance to students for temporary accommodation as well as assistance to take care of medical expenses etc.

The issue continues to be taken up very strongly with the Australian Government. I spoke to Australian Foreign

Minister Stephen Smith on 11 January and expressed my serious concern. I also met Australian FM Stephen Smith in London on the margins of Conference on Afghanistan on 27 January 2010 and conveyed that these attacks are particularly worrisome as the individuals from the Indian community appeared to be singled out and it was increasingly difficult to accept these attacks as mere opportunistic crimes.

The Australian Government has recently set up a high-level Working Group under overall charge of Foreign Minister Stephen Smith to deal with this issue on an urgent basis.

India-Australia relations have been expanding rapidly over the last few years. India attaches importance to its relationship with Australia and we are committed to further strengthening and expanding our relations to cover virtually every area of interaction. People to people contacts are at the heart of any relationship. It is estimated that almost half a million Indians (including 97000 Indian students) and people of Indian origin live in Australia today. The older, more established Indian community in Australia consists largely of skilled professionals, such as doctors, accountants, engineers and academics. It has traditionally been seen as a model migrant community and lauded for its contribution to the Australian economy, having settled and integrated well, and highly regarded for their industry and skills. The Indian community through its culture and values is contributing in making Australia the vibrant multi-cultural society that it is today. They are a vital bond between our two countries.

Let there be no doubt that we take the incidents of assault on our students very seriously indeed. I would like to assure you that the Australian authorities have been fully apprised of the gravity of the situation.. As a result, both at the state as well as the federal level, they have taken several measures as outlined above, to improve security and surveillance; it can be honestly said that they are making efforts to meet our concerns. However, as can be seen, the issue consists of several complex factors, all of which are interlinked and need to be dealt with in a concerted and coordinated manner.

I assure the House that we will continue to monitor the situation closely and work closely with the Australian authorities to deal with the issues concerned and improve the safety and security of our students in Australia.