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Title : The Minister of External Affairs laid a statement regarding efforts by Ministry of External Affairs to assist Indians during recent crisis in Gulf and middle-east; Indian fishermen apprehended in Sri Lanka; and Indian students in tri-valley University in USA.

MADAM SPEAKER: Now, statement by the Minister.

...(Interruptions)

MADAM SPEAKER: You can lay it.

...(Interruptions)

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI S.M. KRISHNA): Madam, I beg to lay a statement on the Table of the House.
...(Interruptions)

Madam Speaker, I would like to share with the House information on the efforts undertaken by my Ministry to assist Indians entrapped in recent crisis situations abroad.

The hon. Members of Parliament are aware of the recent changes in Egypt. Upon request of the Indian community in Egypt, three special flights were arranged by Air India, which carried around 670 Indians from Cairo to Mumbai. This was not 'evacuation' and Government only facilitated arrangement of the special flights of Air India to Cairo which brought back Indians desirous of returning to India.

Libya, Yemen and Bahrain are witnessing violent political protests. In these countries, there is a significant Indian community most of whom have gone there to earn their livelihood and have been contributing to the growth and development of the host country. The Governments of these countries have also acknowledged this fact.

There are around 18,000 Indians in Libya; 14,000 in Yemen and over 350,000 in Bahrain, who are reportedly safe. Our Embassies have been in close and regular contact with the Indian community.

I have personally been in touch with our Ambassadors in these countries and have conveyed that all measures should be taken for the safety and welfare of our nationals there. The Ministry and our Embassies concerned have set up round-the-clock helplines.

We also held inter-Ministerial meetings to take stock of the situation in the region, its impact on Indian and Indian origin community in the region and contingency plans required for them. We are putting in place plans for possible evacuation by land, air and sea from Libya. We have also issued travel advisories for our nationals to avoid non-essential travel to Bahrain, Yemen and Libya.

We will continue to closely monitor the situation in these countries.

Madam Speaker, on the issue of safety and security of Indian fishermen in waters between India and Sri Lanka, allow me to reiterate, at the outset, that the welfare, safety and security of our fishermen have always received the highest priority by Government.

Hon. Members are aware of the two tragic incidents in January this year in the waters between India and Sri Lanka, which resulted in the death of two of our fishermen. The first fisherman was killed after being allegedly fired at by the Sri Lankan Navy and the second died after being allegedly strangled on the seas.

As soon as the news of the deaths of our fishermen was received, the Government had immediately taken up the matter with the Government of Sri Lanka both in New Delhi as well as in Colombo. Expressing our deep concern at these incidents, we emphasized that resort to firing or use of force in such situations had no justification. We requested the Sri Lankan Government to seriously investigate these incidents and ensure that they do not recur. We also emphasized that they should scrupulously adhere to the October 2008 Joint Statement on Fishing Arrangements in letter and spirit.

To underline the seriousness with which Government viewed these developments, Foreign Secretary visited Sri Lanka from January 30-31, 2011, to convey Government's strong concern over the killing of our fishermen. She also called on His

Excellency President Mahinda Rajapaksa. A Joint Statement was issued during her visit where both sides agreed that the use of force cannot be justified under any circumstances. The Sri Lankan Government reiterated their commitment to ascertaining the facts behind the incidents though they denied any responsibility in the two incidents of death of our fishermen. Both sides agreed that the October 2008 Understanding on Fishing Arrangements had led to a decrease in incidents and that there was need to discuss further arrangements so as to strengthen the safety and security of the fishermen. It was decided that the next meeting of the Joint Working Group on Fishing would be convened at an early date and contacts between the fishermen associations on both sides would be encouraged.

I had also taken up these issues strongly with the Sri Lankan External Affairs Minister Prof. G.L. Peiris when I met him on 7th February 2011 on the margins of the meeting of the SAARC Council of Ministers in Thimphu, Bhutan. I not only conveyed our deep concern at the violence against our fishermen but had also stressed the need to ensure that these incidents do not recur.

Hon. Members would also be aware that in two recent but separate incidents this month, a total of 136 Indian fishermen were surrounded by Sri Lankan fishermen at sea, apprehended and handed over to Sri Lankan Police. Our fishermen had strayed into Sri Lankan waters close to Jaffna and Point Pedro. Some of our fishermen were injured in the skirmish at sea.

On receiving the news of the arrests, Government took up the matter immediately with the Sri Lankan Government. I personally spoke to my Sri Lankan counterpart on 17th February and conveyed our deep concern at Sri Lankan nationals taking law into their own hands. I requested for their immediate release. In response to my request, the Government of Sri Lanka released the fishermen on 18th February.

I would also like to point out to this august House that almost all instances of arrests and harassment to our fishermen seems to have occurred in Sri Lankan waters, when our fishermen stray across the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL). While this by itself does not provide any justification for use of force against our fishermen, we need to be conscious of the sensitivities on the Sri Lankan side and of the many Sri Lankan fishermen who have, after a long hiatus, started fishing in that area.

In fact, it is keeping in mind the humanitarian and livelihood dimensions of this issue, that the two Governments on 26th October 2008 had issued a Joint Statement on Fishing Arrangements under which both agreed to put in place practical arrangements to deal with *bonafide* fishermen from either country crossing the IMBL. It was agreed that there will be no firing on Indian fishing vessels. While the incidents in 2011 have no doubt caused much consternation and concern in India, it is also pertinent to point out that after October 2008, there has been a significant decrease in 2009 and 2010 in apprehension of Indian fishermen and use of force against them in 2009 and 2010.

Both our countries have agreed that the Joint Working Group on Fisheries will meet in March this year. We would also encourage the fishing associations of both countries to continue with their informal contacts since such contacts have proved to be mutually beneficial. I hope that, in the days to come, our countries move forward to ensure that our fishermen can fish with safety and security.

Madam Speaker, Hon. Members would be aware that the US Government closed last month Tri-Valley University in California for alleged immigration fraud and other irregularities. The university was authorised in February 2009 to admit a limited number of foreign students, but did not enjoy state accreditation. Approximately 1500 Indian students, constituting 95% of the enrolment at the University, face an uncertain academic future. The students were on valid visas or authorization.

US authorities questioned a number of Indian students and 18 of them were initially detained and then released with radio monitoring devices on their ankles, pending completion of the investigations for possible involvement in the irregularities.

The Government, as well as our Embassy and Consulate Generals in the United States, are fully engaged in addressing the welfare and the academic future of the affected students. I have personally raised this issue with the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Foreign Secretary also conveyed our concern to US officials during her recent visit to the United States. While we recognise the right of every government to investigate and prosecute fraud, we have asked the US Government that the students, who are themselves victims of fraud, should be given adequate time and opportunity to transfer to other universities or adjust their status and, if they desire, return to India honourably. We have also strongly protested the radio collars as unacceptable, which should be removed immediately.

Despite the fact that a significant number of students at the university were dispersed across the United States and

had not registered their contact details with the Indian Mission, our Embassy and Consulates were able to contact a large number of students and have provided all possible assistance to them, including through direct meetings with them, by organising a free legal aid camp and issuing appropriate guidance and advisories.

The US authorities have begun progressively removing the radio tags and have assured us that innocent students would have adequate opportunity to readjust their status or transfer to other US universities.

The Government expects that the United States would take steps to prevent such universities from exploiting foreign students. Government would also advise Indian students to exercise due diligence in applying to foreign universities.

Madam Speaker, I am confident that this unfortunate development will not affect the excellent cooperation between India and the United States in higher education, which includes the presence of over 100,000 Indian students at US universities, who enjoy a strong reputation for academic accomplishments and responsible conduct.

SHRI BASU DEB ACHARIA (BANKURA): Madam, you had assured me. ...(*Interruptions*)

अध्यक्ष महोदया : अभी आपको बुलवाते हैं। आप बैठ जाइए।

â€¦(अवधान)

MADAM SPEAKER: Shri K. Chandrasekhar Rao to speak.

...(*Interruptions*)

12.04 hrs

At this stage, Shri K. Chandrasekhar Rao and some other hon. Members came and stood on the floor near the Table.

MADAM SPEAKER: Shri K. Chandrasekhar Rao, I have asked you to speak.

...(*Interruptions*)

MADAM SPEAKER: If you want to speak, then you can only speak from your seat.

...(*Interruptions*)

MADAM SPEAKER: The House stands adjourned to meet again at 2.00 p.m.

12.05 hrs

The Lok Sabha then adjourned till Fourteen of the Clock.
