

Welcome back!

Even as the country battled to tackle the spread of COVID-19, the government of India was busy planning the Vande Bharat mission, one of the biggest repatriation exercises the world has ever seen, during the ongoing pandemic. On 7 May 2020, the first phase of the exercise was flagged off from Abu Dhabi. Former Ambassador **Anil Wadhwa** takes stock of the mission's progress so far, by land, air and sea routes



To contain the outbreak and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government of India was forced to declare a complete lockdown in India beginning 24 March 2020. The normal functioning of the government, industry, commercial establishments

and public utilities like trains and buses as well as airline operations were all severely disrupted. For a country of 1.3 billion, this presented a crisis without precedent. India also has a 30 million strong diaspora who live, work and study abroad, in addition to the large number of Indians who are travelling abroad on

A man gestures to his father upon his arrival at Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose International Airport from Bangladesh under the Vande Bharat mission repatriation initiative, on May 18 last year



work or vacation. As airlines came to a grinding halt and countries, including India, shut their borders, many Indian nationals and members of the diaspora were stranded in foreign lands. This posed a challenge for the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), which was tasked with the responsibility, along with other ministries of the government such as Civil Aviation, and Home Affairs, to arrange safe passage for Indian nationals back to the country. At the same time, the government assistance was required for the evacuation of 60,000 foreigners from 70 countries back to their homeland and the whole process, which involved coordination of gargantuan proportions, had to

be efficient and smooth, keeping the requirements of safety and health at the forefront at all times.

Much of this responsibility devolved on the MEA, which responded with alacrity, setting up a COVID-19 cell manned by over 100 personnel and officers for this mammoth effort. Officers at the level of Additional Secretaries were made in charge of liaising with designated state governments with a concentration of diaspora abroad on quarantine and other repatriation efforts. Prime Minister Narendra Modi engaged with the Chief Ministers of states on the modalities of the repatriation, and External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar personally

Members of the Indian diaspora following social-distancing norms as they complete pre-boarding formalities for their flight from Dushanbe, Tajikistan, under the Vande Bharat mission

India is also facilitating the travel of foreign nationals on outbound flights under the Vande Bharat mission to countries like UK, US and Germany



Right: Passengers before boarding the 14th flight from Doha under the Vande Bharat mission to Srinagar and Amritsar

Bottom: Indian nationals before boarding a special bus service to Assam, India, marking the start of the Bhutan chapter of the Vande Bharat mission

reviewed arrangements to speed up and streamline repatriation efforts. Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla held video conferences with Chief Secretaries of a number of states as part of efforts to ensure proper coordination of the operation. Heads of Indian diplomatic Missions abroad had coordinated these efforts personally with local governments.

Evacuations of some vulnerable groups of stranded Indians from Wuhan in China, Iran and Japan were carried out in early February itself, at the beginning of the pandemic, but it was with the start of the Vande Bharat mission (VBM) on 7 March that a massive programme was launched to repatriate Indian nationals stranded across the globe. Civil Aviation Minister Hardeep Singh Puri has

called VBM “the mission of hope, help and happiness”. As of 19 Jan 2021, over 48.10 lakh Indian nationals in close to 100 countries across the world have already repatriated by Vande Bharat Mission. Most of them are students, professionals, and short- term visa holders such as tourists. Indian nationals specially from the countries of the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) who benefitted from visa amnesties have also used the Vande Bharat Mission to return home. The government has given priority to those with compelling reasons to return, such as job loss, short term visa expiry, medical emergencies, death of a family member back home, students, pregnant women, and senior citizens.

The first phase of the mission started off with joint operations by Air India, Air India Express, Alliance

The Indian Embassies, High Commissions and Consulates abroad have set up multiple channels to communicate with stranded Indian nationals in the countries they cover

Air along with the Indian Air Force and Indian Navy through operation Samudra Setu. Given the strict restrictions in place, the limited facilities at the airports, and the social distancing norms, the first phase saw a modest 64 flights and sorties by naval ships that brought back over 16,000 Indians mainly from the GCC, South East Asia, UK and USA. Many flights landed at designated airports in the states given the landing restrictions. The MEA coordinated not only with the Indian diplomatic missions abroad but also the state governments to ensure that the operation was conducted in a smooth manner.

The second phase of the Vande Bharat mission began on May 16. During this phase, in addition to earlier destinations,

flights were operated from the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries, Europe, Russia, Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. The MEA has coordinated with Air India and many foreign airlines, to bring stranded Indians back via aviation hubs of Addis Ababa, Amsterdam, London, Frankfurt, and New York. Several flights from other countries, flying in to evacuate their nationals have also ferried some stranded Indians. Flights have brought back Indians from even far-flung places in South America such as Argentina, Peru and Guatemala.

During the course of the second phase, India also allowed stranded and distressed Indian nationals to travel to India by nonscheduled commercial flights and also private and chartered flights cleared by the Ministry of

- Another facet of the repatriation exercise was Operation Samudra Setu, under which the Indian Navy would be bringing back Indian nationals from Maldives, Sri Lanka and Iran

Left to right: The INS Jalashwa ready to take 700 stranded Indians from Colombo, back to their homeland; The medical crew await the arrival of Indian nationals to board INS Jalashwa under operation Samudra Setu at Colombo, Sri Lanka



Heads of Indian diplomatic missions abroad have coordinated repatriation efforts personally with local governments

Civil Aviation, and ships permitted by the Ministry of Shipping. The Indian Navy also made more sorties to bring back returnees from Iran, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. India also facilitated the travel of foreign nationals on outbound flights under VBM to countries like UK, US and Germany. India has also allowed certain categories of Overseas Citizens of India (OCI) card holders to avail of the repatriation flights.

Since domestic flights resumed on May 25, passengers were also allowed to arrive at Delhi airport instead of their final destination in India, and after the 14-day quarantine

period, can travel to their hometowns.

The third phase of the VBM began from June 12. Under this phase, there were a significant increase in the number of private airlines and flights. The numbers of repatriations being made also gone up, with India making a more efficient use of quarantine capacity. Since then many phases of Vande Bharat Mission has been accomplished and the process has been streamlined to continue the Mission.

The Indian Embassies, High Commissions and Consulates abroad have had a very central role to play in mission Vande Bharat. They have set up dedicated, multiple help lines, and have been active on social media



Clockwise from left: Children from the Indian diaspora before their flight under the VBM from Doha, Qatar; Women pose before boarding the 19th flight from Qatar to India under the VBM; Members from the Indian embassy greeting children before their flight from Colombo, Sri Lanka



Clockwise from top: Indian volunteers assisting with the registration and screening of Indian nationals for the Vande Bharat mission in Maldives; The Air India crew preparing to depart to India from USA under the VBM; External Affairs Minister of India Dr S Jaishankar reviewing preparations for the VBM through a virtual meeting with the Heads of Indian Missions abroad

platforms in order to communicate with stranded Indian nationals in the countries they cover. The Indian embassies across the world have contributed significantly to provide accommodation and food to stranded Indian nationals. Indian missions have also liaised with local governments to help Indian nationals extend their short duration visas to avoid illegal stay in the countries where they are stranded. They have been responsible to ensure that the standard operation

procedures devised by Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Civil Aviation are adhered to and communicated to returning passengers. Many Indian nationals have reported and commended the presence of Indian Ambassadors, Consul Generals and senior officials at airports to see off departing flights and ensure smooth operations.

India has conducted several large-scale evacuations in recent times. This includes the airlift from Kuwait, operation Rahat from Yemen as well as the repatriation missions from Iraq and Libya. However, once the VBM and operation Samudra Setu are completed, India's COVID-19 evacuation would have been the biggest, the most extensive, and a very successful mission, in contemporary history.



Ambassador Anil Wadhwa has served as Secretary (East) in the Ministry of External Affairs, and as the Indian Ambassador to Poland, Oman, Thailand and Italy. He has also been posted to Indian Missions in Hong Kong, China and Switzerland and worked for the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in The Hague.