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(Formed by Hon. Pravind Kumar Jugnauth)

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MAURITIUS

Seventh National Assembly

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FIRST SESSION

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Debate No. 17 of 2020

Sitting of Wednesday 10 June 2020

The Assembly met in the Assembly House, Port Louis, at 11.30 a.m.

The National Anthem was played

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)
ORAL ANSWER TO QUESTION

COVID-19 PANDEMIC - MAURITIAN NATIONALS - REPATRIATION

The Leader of the Opposition (Dr. A. Boolell) (by Private Notice) asked the Minister of Foreign Affairs, International Trade and Regional Integration whether, in regard to the Mauritian nationals stranded abroad amid the COVID-19 pandemic, he will state –

(a) the number thereof since March 2020 and the countries where they were or are presently located and table the lists thereof;

(b) if an orderly repatriation plan has been finalised and, if so, indicate the dates of repatriation and from which countries and table copy of the said plan;

(c) the expected date of repatriation of the last such Mauritian national, and

(d) the types of distress cases thereof which have been given or are being given priority.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and International Trade (Mr N. Bodha): Mr Speaker, Sir, half of the world was confined with the spread of the COVID-19 with closure of borders, airspace, cancellation of connecting flights and they have left travellers across the globe stranded in many countries.

These include around 6,350 Mauritians in across 92 countries as remote as Trinidad and Tobago, Siberia, Uruguay, Peru, Congo, Sudan, Uzbekistan as well as in Europe, India and Madagascar. The figure I am giving today, in fact, is the figure as at date because a lot of Mauritians, in a lot of situations, they come to the High Commissions and to the Embassies to explain their plight and their desire to be repatriated. We understand their anxiety; we understand the pain of separation from their families and from their loved ones, from their country, but this is a very, very tall order, Mr Speaker, Sir, to be able to repatriate all the stranded people who have been out of the country. In fact, we are talking about 24 African countries, 23 European countries, 22 Asian countries, 14 countries in Australasia and Americas, 6 in Eastern Europe and 3 in the Indian Ocean. I am tabling the list of countries where Mauritian citizens are still stranded.

I wish to inform the House, Mr Speaker, Sir, that we have to explain what is stranded. I believe that being stranded is somebody who had a return air ticket prior to lockdown and because of the decision of the Government of Mauritius to lockdown the country on 19 March, they were in a situation where they could not fly back to Mauritius.
Second, you have those who could not return to Mauritius because of the lockdown and the closure of air space in the countries where they were locked because of prevailing conditions in the countries where they were locked.

And third, those who became subsequently because of the extension of lockdown.

And then you have those who were residing, working, studying and who now because of the pandemic and the situation in countries like India, UK, US, want to return to Mauritius because they feel safe to Mauritius.

So we have the four categories, Mr Speaker, Sir.

The stranded Mauritians then are those who are on a tourist visa, medical treatment, students, business people; those who went in pilgrimage and, of course, in Mauritius we are all sympathetic to their plight and we understand their distress, their trauma and anxiety.

As regards to numbers of repatriated people, Mr Speaker, Sir, the Prime Minister had given a figure here during the speech on the Workers’ Rights Bill and the hon. Leader of the Opposition then had a Press conference and he said that the figures were not correct. But I would like to say here that the figures were indeed correct at that point in time.

So far, Mr Speaker, Sir, Government, with the assistance of our Embassies, with foreign sanitary officials, airlines and other stakeholders has repatriated 1,883 stranded Mauritians from Australia, Dubai, South Africa, UK, France, Reunion Island, Maldives, Turkey and India.

This is a process which is ongoing, which we started, in fact, in January and February when the pandemic was declared in Wuhan, and we were the first to repatriate 47 Mauritians from Wuhan, and, in the month of March, we repatriated 935 stranded Mauritians; in April 111, and in May 448. In June, we have already repatriated 342, and we are planning to repatriate another 645 by the end of June.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the House would appreciate that repatriation of Mauritians in the given context is extremely complicated and requires wide ranging collaboration and intense synergy of actions between our Missions, foreign Sanitary Authorities, airlines, Civil Aviation Authorities and other stakeholders. For instance, the repatriation of the 12 Mauritian nationals from Wuhan took us to Paris, Quay d’Orsay, to China, and ultimately they took a flight and, after their quarantine, they were in the Embassy in Paris to travel from Marseille to Paris.
All the decisions as regards to repatriation are taken by the National Committee with my colleagues Ministers and chaired by the hon. Prime Minister. And we have monitored the situation on a daily basis, depending on the quarantine and treatment capacities as recommended by the Ministry of Health. Because we have to always do the balance between the national interest of 1.3 million people who are exposed to the virus and cases which can come from abroad. In fact, for the last 6-7 weeks, we have had no local cases. All cases have been imported cases so far. So, we had quarantine capacity of, at one point, 300. Then, to make an effort, we moved on to 500 and now we have moved on to 700, Mr Speaker, Sir.

Together with this phenomenon of stranded Mauritians and returning Mauritians, we had another issue. It is when the cruise industry went bust. When the cruise industry went bust throughout the world, Mr Speaker, Sir, we found ourselves with around 2,000 Mauritians crew members working on 21 cruise ships companies in 82 ports around the world, according to the latest updates. Everybody has been hearing about them; there have been videos about them, and we have been in a position to ask them. I am going to explain what is going to be done with the cruise people because we have been working with the cruise company.

But I would like here, Mr Speaker, Sir, to lay on the Table of the Assembly a map of the world where the Mauritians are stranded today. Second, I am tabling a list of Mauritians as they are now, and this is for the Leader of the Opposition.

When it comes to the cruise, Mr Speaker, Sir, 80% of the cruise workers, in fact, have been recruited by three companies –

- Royal Caribbean - 1,000 more;
- MSC Cruise - 545, and
- Celebrity Cruise.

And I am tabling the list of cruises and where they are. And in front of their distress, Mr Speaker, Sir - on one side, we have the distress of the cruise workers; on the other side we have the interests of the national population in Mauritius - we had a working session with the cruise companies about an organised orderly repatriation. In consultation with the cruise companies and in consultation with my colleagues, the Minister of Labour, the Minister of Tourism and the Minister of Health, we have made an arrangement with the cruise companies to be able to have three flights as from now to the end of June, three to four flights to the end of July, which will allow us - we are taking 150 people onboard each flight for a very specific reason. Because of social distancing in the planes, we are allowed only 150 passengers on a
plane. So, we have three flights in June, three flights again in July, and we hope to continue in August. This is as regards to the calendar.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I would like to lay on the Table of the Assembly our orderly repatriation plan for the month of June and for the month of July, and we are working on a tentative plan for August, Mr Speaker, Sir.

As regards to June, we had a flight from Delhi. It was an Air India flight. We had another flight from Mumbai, another Air India flight, and we had a flight by Air Mauritius from Australia. We are having now, in June, eight flights: one cruise from London, one from Maldives, one from Johannesburg to pick up people from Addis and Kenya, one from Seychelles on the 17th, Wednesday, one from Madagascar on 20 June, one from Reunion Island on 21 June, another one for cruise from Rome on 24 June and 30 July.

The plan for July, Mr Speaker, Sir, is to bring in almost 1,200 people on a number of flights; three cruise flights, including Dubai. And we are using Dubai as a hub because we have had the problems of our nationals, for example, in Pakistan, where they were locked down and there were no flights because the whole frontier was closed. But now that we have the possibility of having some flights with Emirates between Dubai and Pakistan, we can bring them from Pakistan to Dubai, and we are using Dubai as a hub. So, the opening of Dubai has been helpful. All those who are from the US and Canada …

(Interruptions)

I am explaining. All those who are from the US and Canada, we are bringing them either to London or to Dubai to be able to take the flights, which will allow us, in the month of July, to cater for about 1,164 people, keeping in mind our quarantine capacity. All the time, we have been keeping in mind the quarantine capacity and we will continue on this trend, Mr Speaker, Sir.

As regards to what were the criteria for repatriation, well, everybody wants to be repatriated, because every time we went to one city or one destination, it was not easy. So, we had very strict criteria which were monitored by the High Commissions and the Embassies and, in some cases, by the Consulates.

The criteria was a valid return ticket to Mauritius; patients who had gone for medical treatment and accompanying relatives or carers, elderly persons above 60, families with toddlers, children, students and other Mauritians in distress. Distress, you have students who have no hostel, no campuses, no courses and no money, and we have been trying to see how
we can bring them here. We have a COVID test not exceeding five days from the time of embarkation, and this is the condition for the Mauritians to be able to board the flight.

In spite of this, so far, the cases in Mauritius have been imported cases from Mumbai, from Delhi, and in spite of the fact that in some cases the PCR tests were negative, when the Mauritians arrived here in quarantine or on arrival, they were tested positive. So, we have changed the protocol and now, we have a PCR test within five days before embarkation, another PCR test on arrival, another one on the 7th day, another one on the 14th day before they are allowed to leave.

As regards when will the last Mauritians come back to Mauritius, I think the hon. Leader of the Opposition will understand that we have a visibility for June, July. For August, a lot will depend on how frontiers are going to be opened, a lot would depend on how flights are going to operate, and flights are going to be very costly because of social distancing, and a lot will depend on the situation in Mauritius and abroad.

I am going to end up here and I would like to stress on two things, Mr Speaker, Sir. We should never forget that this virus is aggressive, it contaminates people very easily. One person can contaminate a whole plane. We know exactly what happened with the cruise, carriers, warships in India, what happened in France, what happened in Yokohama, what happened in the US. We have to be very cautious. On the one hand, we share the pain of separation of our nationals everywhere. We are working as hard as we can to be able to bring them back and, hopefully, if things get better, we will be able to have all the Mauritians back in Mauritius and we will be able to, at the same time, see to it that we don’t have a second surge here and we don’t have clusters here because of imported cases and, at the same time, see to it that our nationals are back home.

Thank you, Mr Speaker, Sir.

**Dr. Boolell:** Mr Speaker, Sir, the Minister, of course, has given a lengthy reply. I take it for granted that ample time will be given to all of us to put relevant questions to the Minister. Can I ask the Minister that as signatory to the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights and the African Convention on Human Rights, we have an obligation as a State - I am sure the hon. Minister would agree - to repatriate our people? Can I ask him whether it needed a lot of pressure to be borne upon Government for Government to act and to have an orderly plan?
Mr Bodha: My colleague in the Committee would bear testimony to that. Let me answer with regard to the International Conventions. Of course, we can understand that it is a right to enter our own country of nationality, but there are also the emergency cases. The whole world was confined.

Dr. Boolell: Knowing that this is of a tall order, therefore, we have to make it easy for ourselves. Can I ask the Minister, why is it that when a ship was not too far from our coastal area, that ship was not allowed to enter our port and to disembark those people who were enduring a lot of hardship? As a humane Government, I would have expected Government to act and to react promptly to a request made, not only by the parents of these people but by the Captain of the ship who asked for rights to dock.

Mr Bodha: Mr Speaker, Sir, I have to explain this very carefully. When we take a plane, the plane is sanitised, the crew, they wear PPEs, we have social distancing. As regards that ship, I hope the hon. Leader of the Opposition is talking about the Volendam. The Volendam was carrying 13 Mauritians. In fact, they were not carrying 13 Mauritians. The 13 Mauritians were on another ship called Island Princess. And if we had given the authorisation, then they would have been transhipped in the high waters from the Island Princess to the Volendam.

(Interruptions)

Okay!

Mr Speaker: Allow the Minister to reply!

Mr Bodha: Yes. There was one thing which was never said. That onboard the Volendam, you had 700 other people.

(Interruptions)

Yes! What were the conditions under which these people were faring at sea? And there was a case in Court. What was the Judge’s ruling? We had a curfew. I understand.

Mr Mohamed: There was no ruling.

(Interruptions)

Mr Bodha: There was a ruling. I don’t have it with me, but there was a ruling. The ruling said three things. We had never given approval to the ship to come to Mauritius and
that was on the 8th. So, that is well in advance, but the ship wanted to barge in in the Mauritian waters. That was the first thing.

The second, the Judge said that there was a curfew. Now, the question is whether you will let ships barge in in the Mauritian waters. I can understand the pain and the tragedy of those who were onboard, so near to their motherland. But then, we cannot allow ships just to barge in in the Mauritian waters and come to the port and just disembark their crew members.

**Mr Mohamed:** Mauritian citizens!

**Mr Bodha:** Yes, they are Mauritian citizens!

**Mr Speaker:** Let the Minister reply!

**Mr Bodha:** But let me tell you one thing now. We wrote a letter to all the crew companies to tell them “please, take care of the crew members, as mentioned in their contract, including medical treatment”.

Second, stay where they are up and until …

*(Interruptions)*

Just like we are having the orderly, how is it that now we are organising seven flights of crew members? They were on ships all around the world! So, now we are bringing them to ports where Air Mauritius can come and collect them.

**Dr. Boolell:** Now, I can’t understand the double standard of this Government. At the time when the contagion was at its peak, Caribbean cruise ships were allowed to enter our port with tourists. So, either as a responsible Government, you took appropriate measures to see to it that there was full compliance to sanitary measures and you allowed those people to come to Mauritius.

**Mr Bodha:** It was before the lockdown.

**An hon. Member:** Private jets were allowed!

**Dr. Boolell:** Do you know of the number of private jets that have been allowed to land in Mauritius during lockdown?

**Mr Speaker:** Only one Leader of the Opposition in the House!

*(Interruptions)*
Mr Bodha: What we had told the ship companies is: ‘stay where you are, stay safe, we are organising’, which we are doing now; we are bringing almost 2,000 people from now to end of July. In an organised manner, how can we allow ships just to come in and barge into the waters? Now, it is organised because they will take the plane. Before taking the plane, they will have the PCR test, the plane is going to be sanitised. On arrival here, they will take the test and, on arrival here, they will go on quarantine. Let me give you an example, hon. Leader of the Opposition. There were experts who came from the Indian Navy to help Mauritius. We were given the assurance by the Indian Authorities that they were COVID free, that they had done their quarantine onboard the ship. They had gone to the Seychelles, but they had not landed in the Seychelles. Then, they asked for entry into Mauritius and we did a test on entry. We know that it’s not easy on a cruise ship. You know the situation of cruise ships; what happened in a warship in Brest; what happened in Yokohama. I am not saying so. What I am saying is it has to be done in an orderly manner, in a tested manner.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Let the Minister reply! You don’t need a reply?

Dr. Boolell: Hold on a minute! The hon. Minister is trying to find excuses. All the sanitary measures could have been taken. All the sanitary measures! Can I ask him, in relation to our friends from Maldives who wanted to charter a plane, why is it that they were not given landing rights to reach Mauritius?

Mr Bodha: The case is in Court. We had given a date; I think that it was mid-August. We are making arrangements. We see, because we have been able to accommodate in quarantine a bit more people and we will allow the flight soon.

Dr. Boolell: The problem with the hon. Minister, he is trying to find excuses. We are talking of a limited number of people from Seychelles who are willing to travel to Mauritius at a time, of course, when there was phasing out of the COVID virus. Now, can I ask him, in respect of those who are coming from Europe, where the picking points are?

Mr Bodha: From Europe, it will be London and Paris and with the opening of Dubai, Dubai will be a solution. You will have the plan. I have submitted it to you. You will see the quarantine. We have established quarantine for 14 days; sometimes it may end up more. If one single person is tested positive, the whole cohort has to stay there another week before another test is made. So, these are going to be the hubs and, hopefully, with the opening of Dubai, as I said, we can access some nationals who were really stranded like in Pakistan.
Dr. Boolell: Now, am I to understand that our High Commission in London has given strict instructions to those who are willing to come back that they should go to a selected lab for PCR test to be conducted. Is that true?

Mr Bodha: No. The High Commission has been able to organise, help, *encadrer*. We cannot ask them to go to do the test in one specific laboratory. You know how, today, it is difficult to do the PCR test and how costly it is. In some cases...

(Interruptions)

Yes, how costly it is! So, we have been helpful. We have not been asking somebody to go and do the test at that particular lab.

Dr. Boolell: I allow my friends to comment.

Mr Speaker: No, I should allow! If you don’t mind! Hon. Shakeel Mohamed!

Mr Mohamed: I have heard the hon. Minister give a very long answer. But, however, could he explain to the House why is it that on 29 May 2020, his Ministry sent an email to all agents, asking them that there would be a cost imposed upon the Cruise Companies employing Mauritians, 2,000 Mauritians, and the cost would be for quarantine cost, which would have to be borne by the cruise ships - and I am wondering why he kept that quiet and kept it silent all this time in spite of him taking time to answer - and those costs would be to pay for the accommodation package of Mauritian citizens in Mauritius, that is, according to Convention, under the responsibility of the State? Medical facilities in Mauritius, PCR test in Mauritius that the Government would not bear the cost of for Mauritian citizens, and that there is going to be a discounted price to be paid by Cruise Companies of 1,300 USD per Mauritian citizen over and above having forced the Cruise Companies to sign a charter agreement with Air Mauritius Ltd in administration, when instead....

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Come with your question.

Mr Mohamed: Those are the questions. ...when instead they had their own charter flight, which the Minister refused to allow other charter flights to come in at their cost, but imposed Air Mauritius, and why is it - the last point is that - that they are being made to pay Air Mauritius $1,300 or Euros and imposing it upon them? Why is it that each Mauritian citizen is having a price paid on his head as far as his right to come to his own country is concerned? *Pourquoi monnayer un Mauricien de la sorte?*
Mr Speaker: Only a few minutes left!

Mr Bodha: First of all, if we had, according to our calendar, considered the cruise people to come to Mauritius, it would take months. So, they would continue to be on the ships at the expense of the companies.

Second, on the contract of employment, it is the duty of the company to bring back the person…

(Interruptions)

No. But on bringing back the person, the person is being quarantined.

(Interruptions)

Listen! And I will tell you one thing. We had a meeting where my colleagues were here, and you know, one representative of a Cruise Company said, ‘it’s too little’.

(Interruptions)

Yes.

Mr Speaker: No conversation!

(Interruptions)

Mr Bodha: Second thing now. I did not impose Air Mauritius. You should be happy about Air Mauritius!

(Interruptions)

Listen! I told them, ‘if you take your plane, you bring the Mauritian nationals to Mauritius, it is going to fly back empty’! So, the cost of flying a charter which is going back empty is less if you have Air Mauritius, because Air Mauritius can take passengers to London, take cargo, and they will offer you a very good deal. That was the deal! And I think - my colleagues are here - we wanted to give them the facility to do so, and they were happy. They have signed an agreement and we are starting on the first flight on the 13th.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

Dr. Boolell: The Minister, on behalf of Government, has stated that the Government is going to explore all the possibilities. As of now, unfortunately, only a small percentage of
Mauritians have been repatriated, and I am glad that the Minister has given an orderly plan. Can I ask him to see to it that we put our best endeavour to ensure that all Mauritians are repatriated, but, at the same time, convey the message to them as to when they are going to come back. It’s very important that the right information is conveyed so that there is no doubt being instilled.

**Mr Bodha:** Madam...

*(Interjections)*

Mr Speaker, Sir, I am still in the last mandate.

*(Interjections)*

**Mr Speaker:** The spirit of the former Speaker!

**Mr Bodha:** This is my first PNQ for this mandate.

So, by the end of July, we would have repatriated 4,000 people. But I totally agree with the Leader of the Opposition that when you are stranded somewhere, you want to know when you will be able to. I think that, for example, we have reassured the people in Pakistan, in Réunion Island, in Maldives, in Addis Ababa, in Nairobi, in Australia; we have done it. So, now we are using the hubs. What are we going to do? We are going to say, ‘you are going to have a flight to Mauritius on such and such day leaving Dubai, make your arrangements to come to Dubai; we will airlift you from there to come back to home’.

**Dr. Boolell:** And to give them the necessary financial support.

*(Interjections)*

**Mr Bodha:** The financial support, it’s good the Leader of the Opposition…

*(Interjections)*

**Mr Speaker:** One Leader of the Opposition!

**Mr Bodha:** You know, I went to State Bank and to the MCB to see to it…

*(Interjections)*

**Mr Speaker:** No conversation Leader of the Opposition!

**Mr Bodha:** … to see to it that they have a soft loan of Rs100,000 at 3% without surety, without security, and the High Commissions…

*(Interjections)*
… they have been helping in this. Thank you.

**Mr Speaker:** Hon Xavier-Luc Duval!

**Mr X. L. Duval:** Mr Speaker, Sir, I wanted to come back to the Volendam cruise ship. Now, the hon. Minister stated quite clearly that the Indian sailors were allowed to have their quarantine onboard ship. Is that correct?

**Mr Bodha:** Yes!

**Mr Duval:** Now, why didn’t the same apply to the 13 Mauritians coming on the Volendam and Island Princess, given …

**Mr Bodha:** Because...

**Mr X. L. Duval:** Let me finish! Given that there were no COVID cases on these ships, why were they not assumed to have done their quarantine at that time on that ship?

**Mr Bodha:** There were 13 Mauritians on that ship and 700 other crew members.

*(Interruptions)*

What guarantee? We never got any guarantee that the ship was COVID free with 800 people!

**Mr Speaker:** Hon Uteem!

**Mr Uteem:** Thank you, Mr Speaker, Sir. I wanted to quickly talk about the students and other Mauritians who are stranded in Malaysia, whose visas have expired and the Malaysian Government has intimated that everybody needs to leave the country by the end of June. May we know what is being done in respect to our compatriots who are in Malaysia?

**Mr Bodha:** Mr Speaker, Sir, what we have done, we have asked our High Commissions and our Consulates and our Embassies to ask for the Local Authorities to extend visas because of the pandemic and we are having a flight to care.

**Mr Speaker:** Hon Leader of the Opposition! Last question!

**Dr. Boolell:** Can I make an appeal to Government to see to it that we don’t monetise the airlifting of our people and to be more humane and to extend financial support to those who are stranded?

**Mr Bodha:** The financial support is there. Parents and relatives here can take that soft loan. The other thing is as regards to the stranded Mauritians, we have a duty, and we will rise to the call of duty. Thank you, Mr Speaker, Sir.
Mr Speaker: Time is over!