

Suo-Moto Statement by External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar in the Rajya Sabha on the “Situation in Ukraine”

March 15, 2022

Chairman Sir,

I rise to make a statement to this august House on the situation in Ukraine and the implications that it has had for India, including for our nationals resident there. Despite the challenges posed by the serious ongoing conflict, we have ensured that about 22500 citizens have returned home safely. The House would recognize the complexity of the various endeavours that have made it possible. Allow me to share them in some detail.

2. As Hon’ble Members would be aware, a tense situation between Russia and Ukraine erupted into conflict on 24 February 2022. The root causes for this are complex, going back to range of issues including the security architecture, political governance and inter-state politics. To that was added the challenges of implementing understandings reached earlier. What is pertinent to note is that the hostilities placed the Indian community of 20000 plus in direct danger. Even while we were participating in the global deliberations of this evolving situation in the UN Security Council, the pressing challenge was to safeguard our citizens and ensure that they were not in harm’s way.

3. At the direction of the Prime Minister, we launched Operation Ganga, thereby undertaking one of the most challenging evacuation exercises during an ongoing conflict situation. Hon’ble Members should know that our community was dispersed across Ukraine, posing its own logistical challenges. The exercise was undertaken at a time when military actions including air strikes and shelling were underway. It involved movement in a war-torn situation in a large country, at times over a 1000 km. And it required exiting border check points that were clogged by an estimated 26 lakh refugees.

4. The entire exercise involved a ‘whole of Government’ approach with the Prime Minister himself chairing review meetings, almost on a daily basis. At the MEA, we monitored the evacuation operations on a 24x7 basis as well. We got excellent support from all concerned Ministries and organizations, including the Ministry of Civil Aviation, Ministry of Defence, the National Disaster Response Force, Indian Air Force and private airlines. There was an effective coordination with State Governments in ensuring that arrangements made by them for return of Indian students to their respective States once they landed in Delhi or Mumbai.

Mr. Chairman,

5. Let me apprise members of the steps taken in advance of the actual conflict situation. As tensions increased, the Embassy of India in Ukraine had started a registration drive for Indian nationals in January 2022. As a result, around 20,000 Indian nationals registered with our Embassy in Kyiv. Most of the Indian nationals were students who were pursuing medical studies in Ukrainian universities that were dispersed throughout the country. More than half the students

were in Universities in Eastern Ukraine that borders Russia and has been the epicenter of conflict so far. Students hailed from 35 States and UTs of India with more than 1000 students each from the States of Kerala, UP, Haryana, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Bihar and Rajasthan.

6. In view of the continued build-up of tensions in February, the Embassy issued an advisory on 15 February, 2022 advising Indian nationals in Ukraine, whose stay is not essential, to leave the country temporarily. It also advised Indian nationals not to travel to Ukraine or to undertake non-essential movements within Ukraine. Members will appreciate that such advisories are extremely unusual and their very issue is itself a serious caution. Further advisories were also given on 20 February and 22 February pressing students to leave Ukraine. Air-bubble restrictions then in force were immediately lifted in consultation with Ukrainian side to increase the number of direct flights. As a result, around 4000 Indian nationals departed from Ukraine by direct and indirect flights till 23 February 2022.

7. Despite our efforts, however, a large majority of students elected to continue staying in Ukraine. We must understand their predicament in this regard. There was a natural reluctance to leave educational institutions and affect their studies. Some universities actively discouraged and showed reluctance to offer on-line courses. Many of them received conflicting advice regarding safety. The challenges of travel back may have also been a factor. In the period leading to 24 February, the political signals were confusing as well. Public urgings not to be taken in by alarmism and reports of force withdrawals created a confusing picture. The net result was that about 18000 Indian citizens were caught in the midst of conflict when it began.

8. The Ministry started reinforcing the strength of our Mission in Ukraine in anticipation of a difficult situation. Additional Russian-speaking officers were deputed to Kyiv on 22 February to our Embassy. To keep in constant touch with distressed Indian nationals in Ukraine and their families in India, a Situation Room was established in Delhi on 16 February. The Embassy took parallel measures. The MEA Situation Room was ramped up to over a hundred personnel, allowing them to respond to over 13000 calls and 9000 emails till date.

9. The strategy for evacuation was to take out Indian nationals from the western neighboring countries of Ukraine that were Poland, Slovak Republic, Hungary, Romania and Moldova. This was necessitated due to the closure of Ukrainian airspace on 24 February. To carry this out, we were required to strengthen our Missions in these countries so that they could deploy teams at the border points, set up transit camps, operate effective control rooms and facilitate the large number of air flights. Along with that, they also handled incoming humanitarian assistance. 47 additional MEA officials were dispatched to ensure these objectives, supplementing a pre-existing Embassy strength of 58.

10. Hon'ble members should appreciate that along with our Embassy personnel, these officials have gone to extraordinary lengths in difficult circumstances to ensure that Operation Ganga was successful. Their constant intervention at border check-points helped to address the severe challenges posed by over-congestion. Their liaison with local governments and community organizations was responsible for the boarding, lodging and medical attention of evacuees. And, of course, they handled the complexity of flight operations on the ground so that the return home was a smoother process.

11. Under Operation Ganga, 90 flights have been operated, out of which 76 were civilian flights and 14 were Indian Air-force flights. The evacuation flights were from Romania, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia. While Indian Air-Force rose to the occasion, most of the private air-lines, and that includes Air India, Air India Express, Indigo, Spice Jet, Vistara, Go-Air and Air Asia, also participated enthusiastically.

12. During this period, Prime Minister himself spoke to the Presidents of Russia and Ukraine on multiple occasions. He specifically took up the issue of safe evacuation of Indian nationals, especially from Kharkiv and Sumy. Prime Minister also spoke to the Prime Ministers of Romania, Slovak Republic and Hungary and the President of Poland to seek their support for facilitation of entry of Indian nationals to their countries. I most sincerely thank these partner nations for opening their doors and helping our citizens in our hour of need.

Chairman Sir,

13. I was also in constant touch with my own counterparts in Ukraine, Russia, Poland, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia and Moldova for similar reasons. Foreign Secretary maintained contact with Ambassadors of Ukraine and Russia in New Delhi, while our Ambassadors in Kyiv and Moscow followed up with their respective capitals.

14. Prime Minister deputed four Union Ministers as Special Envoys to Romania, Hungary, Slovak Republic and Poland to facilitate Operation Ganga. This included Shri Jyotiraditya Scindia to Romania, Shri Kiren Rijiju to Slovak Republic, Shri Hardeep Singh Puri to Hungary and Gen (Retd.) Shri V.K. Singh to Poland. Their personal supervision of the evacuation processes made a substantial difference in the ease of border-crossing and the care taken of our citizens thereafter.

15. The most challenging part of the evacuation exercise was that of evacuating Indian nationals from Kharkiv and Sumy. Both the places witnessed heavy shelling and air strikes. Many options were worked out to evacuate students through buses and trains. A team from our Embassy in Moscow had also been sent to the Russia-Ukraine border to facilitate the possible evacuation of Indian students through Belgorod and Kursk. Many students from Kharkiv were moved to Pesochin in view of anticipated escalation of hostilities. While our efforts were able to stave off some of the more extreme scenarios, their presence in a safety zone allowed for subsequent ferrying through buses to the western borders. The Sumy evacuation, which was the last one on a significant scale, was also extremely complex as our students faced the prospect of being caught in crossfire. Their evacuation from the city needed a credible ceasefire, a daunting challenge in the current situation. This finally materialized Chairman Sir due to the personal intervention of the Prime Minister himself with the Presidents of Ukraine and Russia. Noting the extraordinary challenges before us, we also dispatched a special team of senior officers to the vicinity of Sumy. Their coordination with the military forces deployed there, with the ICRC and the arrangement of logistics was responsible for the final outcome.

16. During the entire period, our Embassy in Ukraine has been working incessantly to contact Indian nationals, arranging and facilitating transport, coordinating with local authorities, providing food etc. Throughout the evacuation exercise our Embassy was in constant touch with

the Ukrainian authorities. We appreciate their positive response to our requests during this period. Their intervention was responsible for running additional trains needed for the evacuation exercise. The Embassy also provided travel documents within a very very short time in cases where Indian nationals had lost their passports. They also partnered with neighbouring Embassies to resolve challenging situations on the border. On 13th March, in view of the rapidly deteriorating security situation in Ukraine, including attacks in its western part, it was decided to temporarily relocate the Indian Embassy in Ukraine to Poland. This situation will be reassessed in light of further developments.

17. Hon'ble Members should also recognize the great contribution made by community representatives, volunteers and NGOs in the evacuation exercise. Equally noteworthy were the efforts of Indian businesses in the countries neighbouring Ukraine, and indeed, in Ukraine itself. In numerous ways, they assisted in the transport, shelter and sustenance of the evacuating students. They ensured that our citizens did not become a burden for Ukraine's neighbours who were receiving so many other refugees at that time. The nation owes them a debt.

18. In line with India's principle of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam', foreign nationals were also evacuated from conflict zones and brought to India. They included about a 150 citizens, 147 to be exact of 18 countries, among them our immediate neighbours like Bangladesh and Nepal. Many of the Ukrainian nationals that were family members of Indian nationals have also been evacuated. We also provided free passage to Ukrainian nationals from India to Poland in our evacuation flights.

19. In response to the emerging humanitarian situation India has provided relief supplies to Ukraine and its neighbouring countries. A total of 90 tons of relief material comprising medicines, tents, blankets, sleeping mats, tarpaulin, surgical gloves, and eye goggles have been provided.

20. Hon'ble Members are aware that at Kharkiv, Naveen Shekarappa Gyanagaudar, a final year medical student of Kharkiv Medical University, lost his life. He tragically succumbed to injuries received when he had gone to fetch groceries from a shop. We deeply mourn his untimely demise. Our prayers are with his family and his loved ones. Our Embassy in Ukraine is diligently pursuing the repatriation of his mortal remains to India.

21. I would also like to mention the assistance provided to another Indian national, Harjot Singh, who suffered bullet injuries on his way out from Kyiv. His medical expenses were taken care of and arrangements made for his movement from Kyiv to the Polish border. He was brought back in an IAF flight to India accompanied by a doctor arranged by our Mission in Poland.

Chairman Sir,

22. The unfolding developments in Ukraine have simultaneously played out in the United Nations, in particular the Security Council, where India is presently serving as a non-permanent member. India's position on the Ukraine conflict has been steadfast and consistent. We have expressed deep concern at the worsening situation and called for immediate cessation of violence and end to all hostilities. Our statements at the Security Council and the General Assembly have

urged an urgent ceasefire and ensuring safe passage for stranded civilians. We have also highlighted the humanitarian assistance extended by India to Ukraine and its neighbours at this hour of crisis.

23. We have reiterated at the highest levels of our leadership to all parties concerned that there is no other choice but the path of diplomacy and dialogue. We have emphasized to all member States of the UN that the global order is anchored on international law, UN Charter and respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty of states.

24. The Ukraine conflict has major economic implications. Its impact on energy and commodity prices is already visible. The disruption of global supply chain is expected to be significant. India has substantial dealings with both Russia and Ukraine. An assessment in this regard by the Government is underway. However, the House will appreciate that there is all the more need for an Atmanirbhar Bharat.

25. Operation Ganga is a testimony of our commitment to ensure that Indians in distress situations abroad can count on their Government. We have shown this on numerous occasions before, but rarely in one as challenging as the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

26. I am confident that the Hon'ble Members of the House would join me in commending the efforts of the Government of India, the officials of the Ministry of External Affairs, particularly the concerned Embassies, the Ministry of Civil Aviation, the Ministry of Defence, NDRF, the Indian Air Force, private airlines and all those who worked tirelessly and selflessly for the safe return of our nationals from Ukraine. I would also like to convey our sincerest appreciation and gratitude to the local Indian communities in these countries, the civil society, the volunteer organizations. However, what is most noteworthy is the courage and determination of our young students in Ukraine, some of whom had to face very difficult even traumatic situations in active conflict zones.

27. Hon'ble Members, these are undeniably challenging times. But the House may rest assured that whether it is our approach to the political situation, the implications for the economy or the welfare of Indians abroad, our Government will respond with the confidence, diligence and responsibility that has been our hallmark.

Thank you!
