Remarks

By

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Consultative Meeting on the Response to Needs for Migrants

during the COVID 19 pandemic

*22 April 2020 at 9:00 am*

*Meeting room* ***S*** *of the Ministry of Interior*

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*Samdech Krolahom Sar Kheng, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Interior*

*Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen*

On behalf of the United Nations in Cambodia, I would like to thank Samdech Deputy Prime Minister for your leadership in convening this important meeting today.

I highly appreciate the active engagement of the national councils, line ministries, and relevant national authorities and look forward to a fruitful discussion and continued partnership.

Before I begin, I wish to commend the extraordinary efforts of H.E Chou Bun Eng, Secretary of State, Ministry of Interior and her team for their timely response to needs of the returning Cambodian migrant workers and their communities, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We are also grateful to HE Chou Bun Eng and her team for organizing this important discussion, together with my UN colleagues. Thank you, Excellency.

*Samdech Krolahom Deputy Prime Minister*

*Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen*

The world faces an unprecedented threat from COVID-19. This is the most challenging crisis the world has faced since the Second World War. It is a global health crisis unlike any other — one that is spreading human suffering, destabilizing the global economy and upending the lives of billions of people around the globe.

Every country is now grappling with or poised to suffer the devastating consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic: the tens of thousands of lost lives; the broken families; the overwhelmed hospitals; the overworked health workers.

While the COVID-19 pandemic is first and foremost a health crisis, its implications are much more far-reaching. We are already seeing its tremendous social and economic impact, as governments around the world struggle to find the most effective responses to rising unemployment and the economic downturn. The International Labour Organization expects working hours equivalent to 195 million full-time workers to be lost globally in the second quarter of 2020, with workers losing as much as US $3.4 trillion in income by the end of the year.

Women are significantly impacted by the crisis. Women play a disproportionate role in responding to the virus, including as frontline healthcare workers and carers at home. Women disproportionately work in insecure labour markets and are harder hit by the economic impact that COVID-19 is driving. We are also seeing that women are experiencing heightened exposure to domestic violence as they remain within their homes.

The risks posed by the COVID-19 crisis to children are also enormous. For many children, this crisis will mean limited or no education, or falling further behind their peers. More than 800 million children are out of school right now — many of whom rely on school to provide their only meal. Children must have access to food and equal access to learning – bridging the digital divide and reducing the costs of connectivity.

*Samdech*

*Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen*

Like many countries around the globe, the Royal Government of Cambodia faces a complex challenge in responding to the impact of COVID-19, not only in the health sector but also in other sectors such as education, tourism, trade, finance and industry.

While there were only 122 cases of COVID-19 reported until the 20th of April, the unfolding Covid-19 crisis will affect the entire population in Cambodia. But certain population groups will be disproportionately hit.

This is due to a variety of factors. Many are already vulnerable to begin with because they lack income security and health protection. More than 60% or at least 10 million Cambodians do not have financial protection when they fall ill. This means that many of the hardest-hit sectors, will be workers in the informal economy, migrant workers, women, children, people with disabilities, older persons, individuals living with HIV/AIDS, and their families. If they cannot afford to miss a day’s wage or seek medical care if they are ill, the public health measures to stop COVID-19 transmission will fail.

Because of this, today’s dialogue and its focus on the particular challenges of managing risks to one of these vulnerable populations: the returning migrant workers, their families and their communities, it is also an important opportunity to help us prepare for large scale community outbreak that focuses on the most vulnerable populations.

For this, we are encouraged to see the high-level political commitment, the establishment of a National Committee to Combat COVID-19, Inter-Ministerial Committee on COVID-19 and provincial committees for fighting against COVID-19.

Many measures have been put in place, not only to suppress the transmission of COVID-19, but equally to address its numerous social and economic consequences.

We appreciate the leadership of the Ministry of Interior and sub-national authorities for the efforts to strengthen control, coordination, and monitoring of the health of people returning from Thailand.

The recent return of tens of thousands of migrants from Thailand, crossing the border to Cambodia has raised concerns about the possibility of seeding of new clusters in their home communities, as well as transmission among returnees in their movements to get home. The majority of migrants have returned to rural areas in Cambodia, which raises the difficulties for monitoring, testing or treatment of COVID-19 cases that may arise.

We also know that not only returning migrant workers are likely to lose their livelihoods and income. Many internal migrant workers, in the services, tourism, garment and construction sectors are also affected by the COVID pandemic. Reduced remittances to their households in rural areas creates a cascading impact.

While initial assessments to understand the impacts and needs of the returned migrants are being conducted, we have already seen the compounding challenges, with the loss of livelihoods.

*Samdech,*

*Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,*

The United Nations in Cambodia, under the technical leadership of WHO and IOM, is working closely with the Royal Government, H.E Chou Bun Eng, Secretary of State of the Ministry of Interior to mobilize support for the returning migrants and host communities.

In this regard, two technical teams have been organized within the UN to focus on: (1) health and protection; and (2) food security and livelihoods. These two work streams are interlinked.

*On health and protection*, WHO and IOM co-lead efforts to support the Royal Government in the response, with the goal to detect, stop, prevent spread of COVID-19, and prepare for large scale community transmission.

*On food security and livelihoods*, WFP and FAO co-lead efforts, with potential interventions supporting basic resettlement package and targeting such interventions; conducting vulnerability analysis and adapting information management systems in NCDM and subnational committees on population movements and details of migrant and host community households; and preparing macro-economic, food system and social protection analysis and interventions.

In parallel, the UN under the technical lead of UNICEF and WHO have worked closely with the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Interior and sub-national authorities on risk communication, community engagement and mobilization to respond to COVID-19.

As the situation evolves, it is critical to communicate to the public what is known, what is unknown and what is being done. Together with the Royal Government, we will make every effort to ensure trust, transparency, equity, inclusion and protection across the preparedness, response and recovery spectrum. Access to information plays a critical role in ensuring that no one is left behind in the preparedness and response, including adapting information for people with specific needs and disabilities, such as the visually-and hearing impaired.

My colleagues will provide further details in their interventions.

UN’s support to managing risks to returning migrant workers and their communities is also inter-linked with our efforts to support an immediate, large-scale and coordinated social protection response. We are coordinating this closely with the Ministry of Economy and Finance and other development partners. Health and social protection measures in other countries have proven to be essential to contain the virus, provide income security to those most affected, and to ensure the economy is able to weather not only the current but also future crisis.

*Samdech,*

*Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,*

COVID-19 is a devastating global crisis, but it could present an opportunity, if we choose to grasp it - an opportunity to learn, and to improve.

Together, our collective efforts to prepare for and respond to COVID-19 can be cast even wider, to build a stronger health and social protection system for the country, and a more resilient society.

Such enormous efforts and investments now can mean that Cambodia will be better able to meet similar challenges in the future.

Cambodia can use these challenges as opportunities for strengthening and transforming the nation’s health system. Thus, the investments in preparedness is important. This is more than money: it is also about the time, the effort and the systems we need to put in place to be better able to respond now, and in the future. Funding the emergency response to fight COVID-19 is obviously key. But so is sustainable, strategic and long-term investment in the Cambodian health system. This investment will ensure a strong health security system. This investment will ensure that it can support the continuum of health care including not only reproductive, maternal, neonatal, child and adolescent health, but also be transformed to cater for future pressing needs for ageing populations and non-communicable diseases.

To achieve this, it is vital to apply a ‘whole-of-government’ and a ‘whole-of-society’ approach, if we are to effectively overcome the pandemic.

We must act together, united, to use all of our resources and capacity to protect the people of Cambodia.

We cannot achieve this individually. But together we can.

*Samdech, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,*

If you allow, may I now invite my colleagues to present briefly the work that they are leading:

First, Dr. Ailan Li, Representative of the World Health Organization in Cambodia will provide a Global and National Situation Update, as well as appraise us of the progress on the implementation of the National Strategic Preparedness and Response;

Second, Ms. Kristin PARCO, Chief of Mission, International Organization on Migration, will elaborate on Returning Migrant Workers’ Vulnerabilities, as well as the Health and Protection Response; and

Third, Ms. Francesca ERDELMANN, Country Director, World Food Programme, will cover the Food Security and Livelihood Response.

Thank you once again for this opportunity.