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## **Unprecedented repatriation programme: India's Vande Bharat Mission in 2020**

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### **Abstract**

Indian government launched an unprecedented repatriation programme during the Covid pandemic and has brought nearly 4 million overseas Indian citizens home as of mid December 2020.

### **Keywords**

India; repatriation; return migration; Vande Bharat Mission; operational process

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As the Covid-19 pandemic affected one country after another, and with the imposition of travel restrictions worldwide, there was a sudden need for governments to ‘rescue’ its citizens who were stranded overseas. On this front, the Indian government was particularly proactive prior to the announcement of lockdown in India on March 24, 2020.<sup>3</sup> Between February and April, the Indian government embarked upon multiple missions to repatriate its citizens, starting with missions to Wuhan in February. Another ‘rescue’ mission was launched in February to bring back members stranded on the Diamond Princess cruise in Japan. In the month of March, the missions were directed to Iran and Italy, which were severely affected by the pandemic, with a rescue mission being conducted in Iran as late as March 22.

The rescue missions were brought to a halt once the government proclaimed a nationwide lockdown starting on March 24. With borders sealed and air travel banned, the migrants and native-born Indians stranded abroad were left with no option to come back to their home country until the end of the lockdown period.

Over the years, India has undertaken several evacuation missions, particularly in the Middle-East, which is the most popular destination for Indian migrants. The region has notoriously witnessed several conflicts in the last few decades. To date, the largest civilian evacuation airlift in the world had been conducted by India, in 1990, when over 170,000 people were evacuated from Kuwait during the Gulf War.<sup>45</sup>

Fast forward to 2020. As the pandemic spread, calls for repatriation intensified, and the number of requests for evacuation by the stranded workers grew overwhelmingly (Table 1). The majority of the requests came from migrants in Gulf countries, the highest being the United Arab Emirates, followed by Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait.

**Table 1: Repatriation Requests Received (as of 16<sup>th</sup> September 2020)**

Country	Total Requests
United Arab Emirates	305056
Qatar	120600
Oman	100604
Saudi	90119
Kuwait	80732
United States of America	69030
United Kingdom	44759
Bahrain	41763
Nepal	26379
Singapore	21832
Australia	21486
Canada	20385

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Home Affairs. 2020. *Government of India to facilitate return of Indian Nationals stranded abroad* [Press release]. Available online at: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRIP=1620953>. Last accessed 29 December 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Priyadershini, S. 2016. Airlifted from Kuwait. *The Hindu*. 27 January 2016. Available online at: <https://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/Airlifted-from-Kuwait/article14022775.ece>. Last accessed 13 January 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Fabian, K.P. 2020. Lessons in the airlift from Kuwait. *Frontline*. 19 June 2020. Available online at: <https://frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/article31766832.ece>. Last accessed 13 January 2021.

Germany	17322
Russia	15616
Malaysia	14934
Ukraine	14585
Kyrgyzstan	14249
France	12002
Nigeria	11694
Bangladesh	10996
Other Countries	108379
<b>Total Requests</b>	<b>1162522</b>

Source: Lok Sabha Q&A Session, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2020<sup>6</sup>

Amidst mounting pressure on the central government from state governments, like Kerala, which constantly sought permission to bring back the Non-Resident Keralites (NRKs) stranded abroad, multiple Public Interest Litigation (PILs) were filed in Supreme Court and High Courts in the concerned states, along with appeals that were made by stranded Indians abroad. Finally, an initiative was announced by the Indian government in April 2020, named the Vande Bharat Mission, which was to start in May, for the safe passage of Indian nationals back to the homeland.

This evacuation mission is jointly coordinated by the Ministries of External Affairs, Home Affairs, and Civil Aviation, as well as state governments. The missions were to be carried out primarily by aircrafts. In the initial stages, the Indian Navy, too, was involved. Under the name Samudra Setu (Sea Bridge), the Indian Navy deployed ships to the Gulf to rescue stranded Indians in the region. A standard operating protocol was devised by the Indian government to ensure the safety and health of returnees. Indian embassies, high commissions and consulates were given the charge of preparing the list of distressed nationals. They communicated to stranded nationals through social media and created helplines. The stranded Indians were advised to register in portals, and the passengers were instructed to follow health protocols issued by the Ministries of Health and Civil Aviation, as well as the Indian Medical Association, throughout the journey. Upon reaching India, all the passengers are screened at the airport and strictly advised to undergo quarantine for a period of 14 days. The state governments were advised to make arrangement for the quarantines and testing, and to monitor and help returned nationals during their quarantine period and after.<sup>7</sup>

The first phase of the mission was flagged off from Abu Dhabi on May 7, 2020, and implemented jointly by Indian Air Force and Navy, along with Air India and its subsidiary Air India Express. A total of 64 flights were arranged to 12 countries, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the United Kingdom (UK). About 12,708 passengers were brought back to India. In addition, the Indian Navy dispatched two naval ships each to the Maldives and UAE as part of the mission.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of External Affairs. 2020. Lok Sabha, Unstarred Question No.479, Answered on 16/09/2020 by MEA, Shri V. Muraleedharan.

<sup>7</sup> Wadhwa, Anil. 2020. Welcome Back, India Perspectives. *India Today*. Available online at: [www.indiaperspectives.gov.in/en\\_US/welcome-back/](http://www.indiaperspectives.gov.in/en_US/welcome-back/). Last accessed 29 December 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Defense. 2020. *INS Magar Departs Male with Indian Citizens Embarked* [Press release]. Available online at: <http://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRIP=1622776>. Last accessed 29 December 2020.

Seven phases have been completed in the Vande Bharat Mission thus far, with the eighth phase currently underway since November 1. As of December 17, the number of Indians repatriated through the Vande Bharat Mission stood at 3,840,000 (Table 2). The missions were initially concentrated towards the Gulf region, but later stretched to other parts of the world.

**Table 2: Vande Bharat Mission - Phases and Repatriation**

Phases	Period	Mission Countries	Cumulative No of Repatriates
I	7 <sup>th</sup> May 2020 -15 <sup>th</sup> May 2020	12	12708
II	16 <sup>th</sup> May 2020-10 <sup>th</sup> June 2020	47	165,375
III	12 <sup>th</sup> June 2020 -2 <sup>nd</sup> July 2020	43	503,990
IV	3 <sup>rd</sup> July 2020-31 <sup>st</sup> July 2020	29	900,000
V	1 <sup>st</sup> August 2020-31 <sup>st</sup> August 2020	22	1,300,000
VI	1 <sup>st</sup> September 2020-31 <sup>st</sup> September 2020	24	1,645,000
VII	1 <sup>st</sup> October 2020-31 <sup>st</sup> October 2020	24	2,157,000*
VIII	1 <sup>st</sup> November 2020 – 31 <sup>st</sup> December 2020	24	3,840,000**

Source: Compiled from the Media briefings and press releases of the Ministry of External Affairs and Ministry of Civil Aviation, 2020<sup>9</sup>

\*Figure as of November 6, 2020

\*\*Figure as of December 17, 2020

During the repatriation campaign, flights were designated to evacuate passengers specifically from the destination to one particular state in India at a time. The recipient state government in India would ensure that all precautions, including enforcing the mandatory quarantine period, were taken. Some states, like Kerala, also made COVID-19 testing mandatory prior to arrival in the state, with migrants being asked to produce COVID-19 negative certificates to board flights.

**Table 3: Repatriates by Country under Vande Bharat Mission**

Country	Repatriates	Percentage
Bahrain	24704	1.94
Canada	13342	1.05
France	16337	1.29
Germany	19744	1.56
Kuwait	90759	7.15

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Civil Aviation. 2020. *8503 Indians return from abroad in 43 flights under Vande Bharat Mission since 7th May 2020* [Press Release]. Available online at: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRIP=163475>. Last accessed 29 December 2020;

Ministry of External Affairs. 2020. *Transcript of Virtual Weekly Media Briefing by the Official Spokesperson*. 17 September 2020. Available online at: [https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/33008/Transcript\\_of\\_Virtual\\_Weekly\\_Media\\_Briefing\\_by\\_the\\_Official\\_Spokesperson\\_17\\_September\\_2020](https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/33008/Transcript_of_Virtual_Weekly_Media_Briefing_by_the_Official_Spokesperson_17_September_2020). Last accessed 29 December 2020;

Ministry of External Affairs. 2020. *Transcript of Virtual Weekly Media Briefing by the Official Spokesperson*. 01 October 2020. Available online at: [https://mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/33106/Transcript\\_of\\_Virtual\\_Weekly\\_Media\\_Briefing\\_by\\_the\\_Official\\_Spokesperson\\_01\\_October\\_2020](https://mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/33106/Transcript_of_Virtual_Weekly_Media_Briefing_by_the_Official_Spokesperson_01_October_2020). Last accessed 29 December 2020.

Oman	85498	6.73
Qatar	104444	8.23
Saudi Arabia	163851	12.91
Singapore	24867	1.96
United Arab Emirates	457596	36.04
United Kingdom	39141	3.08
United States of America	77305	6.08
<b>Total Repatriated under Vande Bharat Mission</b>	<b>1269549</b>	

Source: Rajya Sabha Q&A session, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2020<sup>10</sup>

According to the data collected over the years by the Indian government through Emigration Check Required (ECR) passport holders emigrating abroad for work, it was found that the majority of Indian workers emigrating abroad have been from the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, Kerala, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh. Table 4 shows a similar picture, with Kerala accounting for a significant portion of the repatriates, at 29 per cent, followed by Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra.

**Table 4: Repatriates by State of Arrival under Vande Bharat Mission**

State	Repatriates	Percentage
Andhra Pradesh	33413	2.63
Bihar	33708	2.66
Delhi	228705	18.02
Gujarat	24502	1.93
Karnataka	61380	4.84
Kerala	372053	29.31
Maharashtra	96796	7.63
Punjab	32017	2.52
Rajasthan	32709	2.57
Tamil Nadu	110246	8.69
Telangana	66518	5.24
Uttar Pradesh	116009	9.14
India (Total)	1269549	

Source: Rajya Sabha Q&A session, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2020<sup>11</sup>

Though the rescue missions undertaken by the Indian government can largely be labelled successful, it had its own set of challenges. To begin with, there were reports of exorbitant prices charged for the flights operated through the Vande Bharat Mission. After reports of customers having to bear

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of External Affairs. 2020. Rajya Sabha, Unstarred Question No.1369, Answered on 22/09/2020 by MEA, Shri V. Muraleedharan.

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of External Affairs. 2020. Rajya Sabha, Unstarred Question No.1369, Answered on 22/09/2020 by MEA, Shri V. Muraleedharan.

flight costs across, the Indian Civil Aviation Minister, HS Puri, clarified that the “rates were reasonable when compared to repatriation flights of other countries”.<sup>12</sup> But this did little to assuage the concerns of passengers.

For instance, there were reports of one-way flights being the same cost as return flights (sometimes even three times that of a normal ticket) from the UK and US, and similarly flights from other popular destinations, such as the UAE, were charging fares of anywhere between 1300 and 1700 AUD for a ticket that would normally cost about 900 AUD.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the commercial aspect of these flights also came into question when the US Department of Transportation limited the number of Vande Bharat flights into the US in June, citing “unfair and discriminatory trade practices.” The US government alleged that while Vande Bharat flights were operating from the US and charging fares, US airlines had been barred from entering into India. They alleged that this created a “competitive disadvantage for US carriers.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Smitha, N. 2020. Exorbitant ticket fares make special flights unaffordable for stranded students, *Deccan Chronicle*. 8 June 2020. Available online at: <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/080620/exorbitant-ticket-fares-make-special-flights-unaffordable-for-stranded.html>. Last accessed 28 December 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Levin, Alan. 2020. US restricts Air India’s ‘Vande Bharat’ flights citing ‘unfair’ limits on its airlines. *The Print*. 23 June 2020. Available online at: <https://theprint.in/india/us-restricts-air-indias-vande-bharat-flights-citing-unfair-limits-on-its-airlines/446832/>. Last accessed 28 December 2020.