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PRESS RELEASE

Prime Minister Modi proposes joint action plan and set up of COVID-19 Emergency Fund for SAARC countries

India's efforts and Prime Minister Modi's initiative at containing the coronavirus pandemic is appreciated world over as a positive and welcome step and agree that the world needs to work together in this hour of crisis. Prime Minister of India, Mr. Narendra Modi interacted with the leaders of the SAARC countries on 15 March 2020 through video conference to chart out a common strategy in order to combat COVID-19 in the region. While SAARC area has around 150 cases as on date, with three fatalities, they have reason for concern as they account for nearly 1/5th of humanity, with densely populated countries with vast variations of means and significant healthcare challenges. This pandemic has strained capacity of the world to assist others. Therefore, regional cooperation is imperative. It is in this context that India is reaching out to its neighbours to: Prioritize humanitarian needs; Reaffirm the imperative of collective action against a pandemic that threatens all of us; Underscore the imperative of cooperative efforts by all countries in the region, to tackle such a complex transnational challenge.

Prime Minister thanked the SAARC leaders for joining the conference at such short notice. Stressing on the ancient people to people ties and interconnectedness of societies of the SAARC countries, he said it is imperative for the nations to prepare to face the challenge together. Key initiative of PM Modi were: to encourage the region to rise beyond bilateral differences to combat a pandemic; India's willingness to use any and all mechanisms to promote mutually beneficial cooperation; underline the fundamental connectedness of the South Asian region and to work together; India is offering partnership to the region as a means of securing collective good; reaffirm the importance of transparency, information sharing and partnership to avoid extremes of reaction either panic or inaction; India's willingness to reflect and protect the interests of our partners in South Asian multilateral fora on such transboundary issues; within limits imposed by India's needs and the uncertainty of the future direction of this crisis, India is ready to help our neighbours. This is in recognition of the fact that we cannot combat this pandemic challenge if we do not help arrest it in our neighbourhood.

In the spirit of collaboration, Prime Minister Modi proposed creation of a COVID-19 Emergency Fund based on voluntary contributions from all the countries, with India making an initial offer of US \$10 million for the fund. The fund can be used by any of the partner countries to meet the cost of immediate actions. He informed that India is assembling a Rapid Response Team of doctors and specialists, along with testing kits and other equipment, which will be on stand-by, to be placed at the disposal of the countries, if required. Prime Minister also offered arranging for online training capsules for the emergency response teams of the neighbouring countries and sharing of software behind India's Integrated Disease Surveillance Portal to help trace possible virus carriers and the people they contacted. He suggested that existing mechanisms like SAARC Disaster Management Centre can be used to pool in best practices.



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He also suggested creation of a common Research Platform to coordinate research on controlling epidemic diseases within the South Asian region. He suggested further brainstorming by experts on the long-term economic consequences of COVID-19, and how best to insulate internal trade and local value chains from its impact.

Among earliest responding nations, India had set up Joint Monitoring Mechanism on 8 Jan 2020, one day after China identified a new type of Coronavirus (COVID-19) on January 7. Our approach was:

- Quickly heightened surveillance, increased monitoring measures in a graduated and transparent manner, while ensuring high degree of public awareness.
- First health advisory issued by India on January 17, to initiate preparedness for COVID-19 and start surveillance of Severe Acute Respiratory Illnesses. This was 13 days before WHO declared it a Public Health Emergency of International Concern.
- Graded response set up from January 17, including thermal screening at key gateway airports. This was graduated to 21 airports as the disease spread to SE Asia. After it spread to Europe, increased to 30 airports with universal screening, as well as land border crossing points that are still open.
- Simultaneously increased restrictions on travel, but in a step-by-step manner, so as not to create panic.
- Increased public awareness campaigns on TV, print and social media, and specially designed 'info-tainment' material.
- In parallel, ramped up systemic capacity by expanding training for medical staff in all States and Union Territories.
- Increased diagnostic capabilities: increased from only one major molecular diagnostic facility for pan-India testing, to over 60 labs currently, within less than two months.
- Developed protocols for each stage of managing this pandemic, including screening at entry points; contact tracing of suspected cases; quarantine and management of isolation facilities; and for discharge of cleared cases.
- Responded to the call of our people abroad, by evacuating over 1450 Indians from major outbreak areas, as well as citizens from several of our neighbours. This included extremely challenging circumstances, in places under complete lockdown.
- We have now built up a protocol for this too, including carrying out testing by our mobile teams deployed abroad.

The leaders thanked the Prime Minister for the proposed initiatives. Prime Minister reiterated the resolve to battle together and said that neighbourhood collaboration by SAARC countries should serve as a model for the world. Prime Minister said the guiding mantra for India has been "prepare, but don't panic". He laid down the proactive steps taken, including a graded response mechanism, screening those entering the country, public awareness campaigns on TV, print and social media, special efforts to reach out to the vulnerable groups, ramping up of diagnostic facilities and developing protocols for each stage of managing the pandemic. He said that India has not only successfully evacuated almost 1400 Indians from different countries but also evacuated some of the citizens of the neighbouring countries in accordance with the 'neighbourhood first policy'. President of Maldives Ibrahim Mohamed Solih thanked the Indian government for the medical assistance from India to deal with COVID-19 cases and for evacuating nine Maldivians from Wuhan. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh thanked Prime Minister Modi for bringing 23 Bangladeshi students back from Wuhan along with Indian students during the quarantine period.
