

NOTIFICATION ON SPECIAL FLIGHTS FOR EVACUATION OF BHUTANESE FROM ABROAD

1. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs would like to inform that several requests for evacuation have been received from Bhutanese living abroad in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Severe measures like lockdowns, curfews and travel bans imposed by many countries have caused inconveniences for many Bhutanese living abroad.

2. Depending on the situation and developments in countries where Bhutanese are present, and also taking into account competing interests and the need to prioritise, the Government has instructed the Ministry to facilitate evacuation of Bhutanese who have expressed interest to return home in a phased manner. In doing so, the following factors are being considered:
 - I. Number of Bhutanese who have expressed strong concern and interest to return home, and the prevailing health situation in the countries of residence, including access to the health care system for foreigners.
 - II. Number of medical apprentice and health professionals among the stranded Bhutanese who will be available to render their services on COVID-19 related matters upon their return to Bhutan;
 - III. The ability to secure necessary clearances from the Governments of the respective countries to undertake special flights to evacuate Bhutanese;
 - IV. Arrangement of adequate quarantine facilities to absorb the number of returnees, in terms of hotels/accommodation and availability of health care personnel. In the event a positive case emerges from the returnees, this will affect the planning of the subsequent special flights for evacuations as the health response system and airline crew deployment will be overwhelmed;
 - V. The technical ability of the two Bhutanese airlines to undertake direct flights to the destination countries, or the availability of international airlines to undertake chartered flights to the nearest countries of transit.

3. Considering the above factors, the Ministry plans to undertake special flights for evacuations from the following countries/cities in the sequence specified below:
 - a) **India:** The first special flights for evacuation will be for the Bhutanese living in India given the very large number of Bhutanese students in India who have expressed interest to return home and the difficulties they are facing in accessing food and other essential services due to the lockdown. The evacuation flights are planned as follows:

- I. The first flight from India is being planned from Delhi to Paro on 9th April 2020, followed by Bangalore, Amritsar and Chandigarh on 11th and 13th April 2020.
 - II. A second phase of evacuation from other key cities in India, where there are large numbers of Bhutanese students such as Chennai, Hyderabad, Bhubaneshwar, Goa, Mumbai, Indore, Ahmedabad, and Bangalore, is also under active planning.
- b) **Gulf Region and Middle East:** Special flights for evacuation of Bhutanese living in the Gulf Region and Middle East are also being planned from 16th to 24th April 2020. A large number of Bhutanese in the Gulf and Middle East have either completed their contracts, been laid off or are concerned due to the continuous rise of COVID 19 infections in the region. The number is likely to increase as many companies in the Gulf and Middle East are deciding to lay off its employees.
- a) **Sri Lanka:** Evacuation of Bhutanese in Sri Lanka will take place on 10th April 2020 due to the large number of medical students stranded in Colombo. This special flight will also pick up RGoB referred patients in CMC Vellore and Bhutanese students in Chennai on its way back to Paro.
- b) **Australia:** Bhutanese in Australia have also indicated their interest to return home. As our airlines do not have the technical capacity to take long range flights, the Ministry is exploring options for our two airlines to make special flights to the nearest transit airports in South East Asia should the situation demand.
- c) **Other regions:** There are Bhutanese studying and working in the wider Asia Pacific region, Europe, the United States and Canada. The Government has at this stage no plans to evacuate people from these regions, as only a handful have expressed interest to return home. The Government is assessing the situation in these regions and will issue timely advisories. Further, when travel restrictions to the countries where our two airlines operate are lifted and if Bhutanese from these regions choose to fly to these transit countries, arrangements can be made for them to be picked up if there are sufficient number of travellers. If Bhutanese from the US, Canada and Europe can travel to the gulf countries from where special flights are planned, they could be accommodated subject to availability of seats.

- d) Detailed information on the special flights for evacuation will be available with the respective Embassy/Mission/Consulate as soon as they are finalized with the airlines and MoH. Therefore, you are requested to contact the focals in the Embassy/Mission/Consulate.

4. In implementing the above evacuation plan, the following may be noted:

- I. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs will seek necessary approvals from different Governments and also liaise with airlines to operate special flights to different cities to evacuate Bhutanese from abroad.
 - II. In order to avail special flights for evacuation, the Ministry requires all Bhutanese living abroad to be registered with the nearest Bhutanese Embassy/Mission/Consulate.
 - III. Individual travelers will bear the cost of travel/special flight as projected by the Airlines. However, the Ministry will ensure that the cost of the special flights by the airlines is kept minimal to cover only the operational expenses.
 - IV. The RGoB will bear the travel cost only for patients referred to India by the JDWNRH and their attendants.
 - V. The capacity of the medical and quarantine facilities of the RGoB will determine the weekly frequency and the origin of the special flights for evacuation.
 - VI. In places where there are large number of Bhutanese, the respective Embassies and Missions will prioritise travelers for the initial flights as follows:
 - a) People with underlying medical conditions;
 - b) Expecting mothers;
 - c) Minors and people with disabilities.
 - d) People without work and those who are laid off.
 - VII. Domestic authorities at the port of embarkation will apply health screening protocols, and symptomatic travelers may be prevented from boarding the flights to Bhutan.
 - VIII. All evacuees will be subjected to mandatory quarantine for 21 days at a Government designated quarantine facility.
5. As we roll out the evacuation plan, the Ministry continues to receive many requests for evacuation from Bhutanese all over the world, including those in Europe, the Americas and wider Asia Pacific region. Ideally, the Government wishes to bring all Bhutanese home. However, we need to consider the complex factors mentioned above and its impact on our evacuation plans. Hence, at this point, the Ministry is unable to ascertain the probability of undertaking evacuation of Bhutanese from all affected countries. In view of the above, the Ministry earnestly requests all Bhutanese to understand the complex

nature of this undertaking, and emphasize the need for those who cannot be evacuated, to avoid movement, exercise extreme caution and stay safe and healthy.

6. The Ministry continues to monitor and assess the situation abroad, especially in countries where Bhutanese are present. Should the situation in these countries deteriorate and there is an urgent need for assistance, the Government assures that it will strive to render all assistance to the greatest extent possible through its Embassies and Missions abroad.

MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

THIMPHU, BHUTAN

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