

‘There should be a common regional strategy in the fight against COVID-19’

Maldives has been a firm believer in regional cooperation: Foreign Minister

MEERA SRINIVASAN

In an interview with *The Hindu*, Maldivian Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid spoke of a range of issues from the country’s fight against COVID-19 to regional collaboration. Edited excerpts:

How is the Maldives dealing with COVID-19?

■ As of 3 p.m. on May 1, we have 468 confirmed positive cases. This includes 145 Maldivians and 323 foreigners. They are from Bangladesh, India, Italy, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and the U.K. Unfortunately, there has been one death, of an 83-year-old wo-

man. We saw the highest number of confirmed cases recorded – 107 – in a single day on April 30. The government is isolating all positive cases in dedicated isolation facilities and taking their direct contacts into quarantine. Elderly persons are being kept in the dedicated hospital facilities in Malé. Contact tracing is done extensively.

You have a National Task Force on COVID-19 chaired by the President. What is its strategy?

■ All our key stakeholders have worked together since the beginning of the first re-

ports [of COVID-19] from late January. The challenge has always been that in the event of a major breakout, our health services would be stretched immensely. The shortage of healthcare professionals is felt more acutely in such a crisis. We made very difficult decisions early on. We temporarily suspended direct travel from China on February 4, 2020. As you know, China is our biggest source market for tourism, and this was in the middle of the peak season.

The virus was first reported in one of the atolls, and has now reached Male. How are you arresting the spread?

■ We had managed to prevent community spread for over a month, until we found



Abdulla Shahid in December 2019. ■ V.V. KRISHNAN

the first positive case in Malé city on April 15. Since then, the rate of spread has escalated significantly. In the past 15 days alone, 448 cases have been confirmed. We are now dealing with containing the spread of the virus in our largest population centre. Malé city has been under lockdown since April 15. This is, as you can imagine, a challenging situation. This city is one of the most congested areas in the world, with a

large population of migrant workers as well.

The Maldives’s primary revenue-earning tourism sector is affected very badly. What are the options you are looking at to revive your economy?

■ Our economy is heavily dependent on tourism. And the disruption in global travel and connectivity has resulted in the closure of the entire industry. And falling demand, and resulting decline in price for fish globally, has impacted the fisheries sector, which is our second largest economic sector. The Maldives imports nearly everything, from basic staple food, to luxury goods, to everything consumed in the tourist resorts. We pay for these

imports from hard currency earned from tourism and fish exports. Last year, we projected a rise of 8% in tourist revenues. Revenue generated by the tourism industry accounts for over 70% of the country’s GDP. Now, tourist arrivals are expected to decline by 50%. The sharp reduction in tourist arrivals this year and shutting down of the tourism industry have brought a cash flow crisis to the government. The government has taken a number of measures, including reducing expenditure and introducing a financial stimulus package with \$161.9 million to prevent the closing down of local businesses.

How does the Maldives view the prospect for regional collaboration?

■ The Maldives is, and has always been a firm believer of strong regional cooperation, especially in the face of adversity, such as the one we are facing now. A common regional strategy must create space for closer cooperation among the health emergency agencies to ensure that the countries in SAARC have unhindered exchange of information. Secondly, because the economic impact of this pandemic on our region will be immense, to formulate an economic relief package. Third, to start discussing a long-term recovery plan for the region.

The Maldives has been working on restructuring its external debt. How does COVID-19 impact your engagement with donors?

■ The Maldives has been very fortunate in its friendships, as we have a number of trusted partners and friends. India is one such partner and friend. On debt, the Government has set in place a debt sustainability strategy since early 2019, and has been pursuing its borrowing, revenue generating, and expenditure policies based on the strategy. However, the unexpected and sharp decline in government revenue will impact the previous forecasts and the current debt sustainability strategy, and the Finance Ministry will be making the necessary adjustments as required.

For the full interview, log on to www.thehindu.com