

Two Sri Lankan prisoners killed and six injured amid national coronavirus lockdown

By Saman Gunadasa and K.Ratnayake
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Two prisoners were killed and six more injured on Saturday when guards opened fire during unrest at Anuradhapura Prison in Sri Lanka's North Central Province. One of those shot died at the prison, which is about 200 kilometres from Colombo, while the other died in hospital.

Citing the coronavirus threat, Sri Lankan prison authorities imposed a ban on all visitors on March 18. Committee for the Protection of Prisoners President Senaka Perera told the media that the Anuradhapura prisoners were angry over the poor-quality food supplied by the authorities since the bans.

Perera said that Sri Lankan prisons are so congested that, in some cases, 5,000 inmates are crammed into facilities meant to accommodate 800 people. According to brief media reports, tensions also rose last week inside Kegalle jail after rumours spread that a coronavirus-infected individual had been brought to the prison.

Anuradhapura prisoners began protesting on Saturday morning after they heard that four inmates had been infected with coronavirus. Authorities claimed they opened fire when some prisoners tried to escape. It is not yet clear whether prison guards or Special Task Force police fired on the unarmed inmates. Army personnel have been deployed near the prison since Saturday night.

The Anuradhapura prison riot occurred as President Gotabaya Rajapakse imposed a nationwide lockdown, beginning on Saturday morning. While it will be lifted in several parts of the country today, the northern districts and several districts in north-western and western province, including Colombo, will remain under lockdown until Tuesday morning.

Rajapakse initially refused to impose a national lockdown, claiming that his administration could

control the situation. He also rejected calls for a postponement of the previously scheduled April 25 general election, hoping to exploit the inability of other parties to campaign. On March 19, the Electoral Commission announced, after the closure of nominations that day, that it was postponing the national poll.

Last night, the number of people in quarantine in Sri Lanka—at hospitals and homes—rose to nearly 12,000 and confirmed infections reached 82. No deaths have been reported.

Amid the rapid spread of COVID-19 nationally and internationally, the Rajapakse administration finally decided to impose a short-duration national lockdown.

The callous and criminally irresponsible attitude of the Rajapakse government was reflected in the president's national address on the pandemic last Tuesday. Rajapakse demagogically declared his administration could control the pandemic and then, in a reactionary call, blamed "outsiders" for bringing it to Sri Lanka.

Rajapakse said a Chinese tourist was found infected in January and released in early February after having recovered, unintentionally revealing that the government took no precautionary measures during this time to protect the rest of the population.

The president also blamed migrant workers and tourists for the spread of the virus, asserting: "Our biggest problem is the travelers, almost 2,000 in number, who had entered the country from high risk countries for about two weeks before we actually started quarantine."

Rajapakse, who insisted that his administration "will be able to completely control this situation," did not announce any additional funds to improve the healthcare system.

As of Friday, the government has allocated just 500 million rupees (\$US2.67 million) for coronavirus health expenses, even as the number of hospital beds for treatment of those infected is rapidly decreasing.

The main quarantine centres have been improvised at armed forces-controlled camps, or institutions like the Kandakadu rehabilitation centre and Batticaloa University. There are currently 22 quarantine centres in Sri Lanka but many of these are unlivable because of the high tropical heat and minimal facilities.

In contrast to Rajapakse's claims about "preparedness," World Health Organisation (WHO) Regional Director Dr. Poonam Khetrpal Singh cautioned countries in South Asia, including India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, to "urgently scale-up aggressive measures" and to "do more, and urgently" to fight the virus. She said testing was very limited in these countries, which is one reason for the low number of reported cases.

Rajapakse also used his speech to push election propaganda for his Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) and to promote "a strong government led by [his older brother and former president] Mahinda Rajapakse."

The Rajapakses are fighting to secure a two-thirds majority in the election in order to remove existing constitutional restrictions on the executive presidency and to ruthlessly impose the burden of the escalating economic crisis on workers and the poor.

COVID-19 is intensifying the global crisis of capitalism and drastically impacting on the Sri Lankan economy. On Friday foreign investors withdrew funds from Sri Lanka, placing pressure on the rupee. The Central Bank also announced an immediate three-month ban on non-essential imports, including cars and electronic goods, to halt the drain of foreign reserves.

President Rajapakse is using the pandemic to further militarise his administration. Prior to his March 17 national address, he held a meeting with members of the Special Task Force set up to combat the pandemic. The new agency is packed with senior military officers.

Brushing aside calls for a total lockdown of Sri Lanka, Rajapakse said: "We managed to defeat LTTE terrorism, unlike other countries in the world. Other countries may have the best medical facilities but we managed to cure infected people, through our efforts."

Former army commander General Daya Ratnayake, who is current head of the Ports Authority, declared: "This is a time that belongs to the military... The military must get the upper hand."

On the same day, Rajapakse formed the National Operation Centre for the Prevention of COVID-19 and appointed Army Commander Major General Shavendra Silva to head it.

Rajapakse's reference to defeating the LTTE, in Colombo's brutal decades-long war against the Tamil population, is an attempt to whip up communalism. Its aim is to divert attention from his government's refusal to adequately respond to the coronavirus. "I'm the one who runs this country. Those holding responsible posts should do as I say," he told the meeting.

While ordinary Sri Lankans face enormous hardships, Rajapakse cynically announced a miniscule reduction of the retail price of a kilo of dhal to 65 rupees and a tin of fish to 100 rupees. In the same breath, he announced massive concessions to big business and investors: "I am also ordering banks and finance companies a recovery period of six months for loan facilities taken out by businesses... [and] steps are being taken for banks to give capital at four percent interest."

Sri Lankan workers and the poor, like their counterparts around the world, cannot rely on governments and the ruling elites to provide an adequate healthcare system, financial support and other vital resources for the sort of internationally coordinated effort required to defeat the coronavirus pandemic.

That is why the working class must take the initiative by uniting with its class brothers and sisters around the world in the fight for a socialist program and the abolition of the capitalist profit system.

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