

Sri Lankan government lies exposed as new COVID-19 infections emerge

By Pradeep Ramanayaka
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Last Thursday, a Russian visitor, who was staying in a tourist hotel in the crowded city of Matara, in southern Sri Lanka, tested positive for COVID-19. News about the case created widespread anxiety and some panic amongst the city's residents. Many parents rushed to their local schools to bring their children home immediately.

The justifiable concern exposes the general distrust, within the population, of the boasts and false assurances of the Rajapakse government to have controlled the spread of the pandemic.

Since the incident, a number of those in contact with the Russian individual have been placed under quarantine, while health officials are reportedly considering a lockdown in the city, after discovering that he had visited several public places there.

In a situation where the Rajapakse government has already abandoned almost all social healthcare measures, the consequences could be devastating, if the virus has spread within the community. All schools, offices, factories and other work places on the island are now functioning normally. The over-crowded public transport system, along with congestion in workplaces, could pave the way for a catastrophe.

In Sri Lanka, the number of COVID-19 cases reported so far is 3,360 and 13 deaths, with several thousand people still in quarantine. Due to the inadequacy of diagnostic tests, the number of actual infections is most likely higher than the officially reported cases.

The government cites the relatively low number of cases, deliberately ignoring the fact that this is a global pandemic, to justify the bogus claim that Sri Lanka has successfully dealt with the coronavirus and that people do not have to worry. This lie is being peddled, as tens of thousands of Sri Lankans, who travelled to the Middle-East and other countries for employment, have been forced to languish in these countries, against their will and at the grave risk of infection, due to the

government's refusal to repatriate them.

Statements made by health officials have revealed that the infected Russian man was not tested for the virus when he entered the island, as a result of the negligence of the authorities. Public Health Inspectors Union of Sri Lanka president Upul Rohana said that neither the local Public Health Inspectors (PHI) nor the Medical Officers of Health (MOH) were informed about the arrival of the aircraft and the crew, with whom the infected person travelled.

Although the Rajapakse government has largely ignored the danger of the COVID-19 pandemic it is spreading rapidly around the world. On September 23, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported a record one-day high of 316,036 new cases of COVID-19 globally. According to COVID-19 figures, the global death toll is nearly one million, while there are already more than 7.5 million active cases. The United States, Brazil, and neighbouring India remain epicentres of the global pandemic, signalling that further infections are likely.

Although health experts, including the WHO, have repeatedly insisted that measures such as social distancing and personal hygiene should not be relaxed, the Rajapakse government has disregarded this advice, pretending that there is no longer any obstacle to moving the capitalist economy forward. The lives of workers, school children, teachers and the rest of the population are being sacrificed in order to boost corporate profits.

The government's decision to allow the Colombo Annual Book Fair to occur, for "Literature Month," is another gross violation of the health measures required to crack down on COVID-19. The book fair, which normally attracts tens of thousands, was held from September 18 to 27 at the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall in Colombo. This was deliberately allowed to take place in order to counter the concerns of ordinary people about any hasty lifting of the

lockdown.

The country's Chief Epidemiologist Dr. Sudath Samaraweera, from the epidemiology unit of the health ministry, stated that it was not advisable to hold such mass gatherings, due to the coronavirus. He insisted: "There are certain technical difficulties in holding such an event at present and it poses a threat to the citizens."

"In the event an individual infected with COVID-19 enters the premises, it will be difficult to conduct contact tracing, due to the large volume of people attending the book fair," he pointed out. But the government simply ignores such warnings because it is determined to resume events as usual.

One of the arguments used by Rajapakse as he "normalises" the country is that Sri Lanka has a strong health system, which can act to control the COVID-19 pandemic. In a keynote address on September 5 to a group of medical graduates, he boasted that Sri Lanka had achieved outstanding success in preventing the coronavirus, while some of the most developed countries in the world were unable to adequately respond to it.

Promoting the reason for that "success," he said: "I am also proud to say that Sri Lanka, despite still being a developing country, has managed to face this situation very successfully because of our free healthcare system."

These statements are simply false. Given the parlous state of the public health service, it cannot deal with the overall health needs of the country, even in normal times. Health officials have been extremely concerned at the devastation that could ensue if the extremely limited number of emergency treatment units is exceeded.

Despite having 34.7 intensive care unit (ICU) beds per 100,000 people, the United States became an epicentre of the virus. The figure is 12.5 in Italy, which faced the worst disaster in Europe. It is clear that the Sri Lankan healthcare system, with a capacity of just over two ICU beds per 100,000 people, could not cope with a major spread of the disease.

According to a survey published this month by the Deep Knowledge Group, an international think tank, Sri Lanka is ranked 92nd in the world, in terms of its ability to protect its population from the COVID-19 pandemic. While Germany has been listed as the safest country in the world, it has nevertheless reported 264,000 positive cases and approximately 10,000 deaths. Even neighbouring India, with more than five million infections and more than 90,000 deaths, ranks as number 80, twelve places above Sri Lanka.

The extent to which any country is currently under

attack from COVID-19 was not relevant in the report's preparation. Its main concerns are the level of political commitment to quarantine and locking down, the nature of management between national and local governments, the quality and capacity of medical care, the impact of the pandemic on the country's economy, and the ability to manage emergencies.

When considering the quarantine facilities—a primary concern of the report—the Sri Lankan government reported that the maximum number of people able to be quarantined at any one time in Sri Lanka is 7,000. Because of this limitation, the government has reduced the repatriation of workers working abroad, putting tens of thousands of Sri Lankans in danger of the pandemic.

Another major factor that exposes the government's empty boasts is the low capacity for PCR tests. The total number of tests carried out so far is less than 300,000. No tests have been performed on randomly selected samples from the community, while the number of daily tests averages a maximum of just 2,000. And the tests are limited to only those who have associated with infected people and with people from overseas.

The cash-strapped Rajapakse government has no plans to develop high-capacity hospitals and testing facilities or prepare adequate amounts of the personal protective equipment needed in the event of a major outbreak. For all its boasting, it has neither the ability nor the intention to allocate the necessary funds to implement such a broad program.

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