Coronavirus will deepen social and health problems in Sri Lanka

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As of yesterday, the number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Sri Lanka rose to five, with three more people testing positive. Sixty Sri Lankans and two foreigners are under observation.

The Rajapakse government has imposed travel bans on 11 countries, including South Korea, Iran and Italy. Yesterday, one-week travel bans were imposed on France, Spain, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden and Austria. This week, the government declared that all schools in the country will close until April 20.

The first coronavirus victims, who include a 52-year-old tourist guide believed to have contracted the virus from an Italian tourist group, are being treated at Colombo's poorly-equipped Infectious Disease Hospital (IDH). It is the only hospital in the country capable of providing Covid-19 treatment.

On March 6, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse proclaimed that Sri Lanka "has been successful so far in the battle against the global health crisis." At the same time, the government has warned that the risk of the virus spreading is high and has called for "public support for the health authorities in taking preventive measures."

In reality, the profit interests of the ruling elite are incompatible with properly-funded public health services, and could create a disastrous situation for millions of people.

The jobs and livelihoods of workers and the poor, who have been battered by the decades-long communalist war and government austerity measures, will be hard hit.

In January, a Chinese woman who visited with a tourist group was found infected with Covid-19. She left the country last month, following treatment at the IDH. After photo-ops with the woman, Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi claimed the country was ready for any virus pandemic.

Wanniarachchi previously instructed health officials to consider using indigenous medicinal methods to treat the coronavirus. The minister met with traditional Ayurvedic practitioners and declared: "Western medication would cost 120 billion rupees ($US650 million), which is not a good thing for the country."

Wanniarachchi's nationalist rhetoric about indigenous treatments is not based on any medical research. What is required to deal with the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic is the global mobilisation of scientific resources to combat the disaster.

Consecutive governments have slashed spending on the public health sector, leaving it in serious decay. In line with the austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), last year's budget allocation for health was just 105 billion rupees, compared to 392 billion rupees for the military.

While health authorities have announced that 17 hospitals are currently on standby, they lack dedicated ICU facilities.

The IDH itself has limited resources. The hospital has no testing kits and has to wait on diagnoses from the Medical Research Institute (MRI). Only 10 beds are available for isolation and treatment of affected patients.

WSWS reporters found that doctors, nurses and other health workers have not been provided with proper clothing to protect them from the virus.

Only limited numbers of PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests are available. The test also costs 10,500 rupees, almost the minimum monthly wage of a worker in Sri Lanka.

The free public health service has been gutted. The number of public hospital beds is severely limited, with

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many patients forced to sleep on the floors of wards or in chairs. Poor patients have to pay for medicines and laboratory tests from private institutions and there are drastic shortages of doctors, nurses and other health workers. By contrast, the private health sector, which only the rich can afford, has prospered over the past three decades.

The globalisation of production has led to a massive growth of the international workforce. Around one million Sri Lankan workers are employed in the Middle East and tens of thousands in Italy and South Korea. Government authorities first instructed migrant workers returning from those countries to remain in their homes for two weeks due to the lack of quarantine facilities.

Rudimentary quarantine facilities have been established at Batticaloa University and the Kandakadu rehabilitation centre in the east. Both facilities are controlled by the military. Visitors from Iran, Italy and South Korea are being held there for 14 days.

Chief of Defence Staff and Army Commander Shavendra Silva proclaimed that the military "is once again shouldering the national responsibility." This is yet another occasion for the army to boost its image as President Rajapakse militarises his administration.

This week, migrant workers arriving from South Korea protested at the Katunayake International Airport over being sent to the Batticaloa centre, because it would cost them 7,500 rupees per day. Later that day, the military said the quarantine service would be free of charge.

Addressing the media, an army spokesman had threatened the protesting workers, declaring that unless they supported the government's quarantine efforts, they should go back to where they came from.

Government authorities are more concerned with maintaining Sri Lanka's position as a global low-wage labour supplier than assisting migrant workers. South Korean consulate official Gamini Senarath Yapa warned that the return of Sri Lankan workers might lead to smaller quotas in the future.

Tens of thousands of Chinese and Indian workers are employed in Sri Lanka. Those who returned home to celebrate Chinese New Year are trapped there because of Colombo's transport restrictions.

According to the Sri Lanka Apparel Exporters Association, disrupted global supply chains could see the closure of 50 or more garment factories in Sri Lanka, resulting in thousands of workers losing their jobs.

A Teejay Lanka garment factory worker in the Avissawella economic zone told the WSWS that overtime had been slashed by half at the plant due to supply shortages from China. The overtime cuts could reduce workers' salaries by one third.

Fishermen, who are ruthlessly exploited by middlemen, are also struggling because major export markets in Europe, especially in Italy, are collapsing. Last week, hundreds of fishermen demonstrated at Dikovita, 11 kilometres north of Colombo, demanding income protection. The government has not offered any solution.

P.B. Jayasundara, an economist and secretary to President Rajapakse, declared this week that if the coronavirus situation worsens more drastic quarantine and disease ordinance measures will be activated.

The ruling elite has no progressive solution to the crisis and has a long record of penalising the victims of social catastrophes. The current government and the parliamentary opposition are all guilty of imposing the IMF's austerity demands, including drastic cuts to public health.

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