

# Sri Lankan medical experts demand mass coronavirus testing

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Sri Lankan medical experts have called on government authorities to immediately introduce mass testing for COVID-19 in order to stop community transmissions spreading the virus throughout the country.

Their appeals, which were published in several newspapers this week, came as confirmed COVID-19 cases rose to 146 and fatalities climbed to a total of three. The number of people officially held in quarantine centres is currently about 1,700. Health authorities have placed many villages under isolation and hundreds of people have been asked to home quarantine.

The call for mass testing was issued by University of Colombo Family Medicine faculty chief Dr. Ruvaiz Haniffa and publicly endorsed by professors Vajira H.W. Dissanayake, Harendra De Silva and Dr. Ravi P. Rannan-Eliya.

“There is a dire need to rapidly increase and expand testing if we want to have a positive impact. The strongest point of our response to the pandemic from a healthcare perspective should be how we can improve our weakest point, which at the moment is testing for COVID-19,” Haniffa said.

Some of those infected may not show symptoms and, because of Sri Lanka’s scandalously low and dangerous testing policies, can go undetected and spread the virus. As of March 29, Sri Lanka had only conducted 2,082 tests. These have revealed 115 infections, an alarming 5.5 percent positive rate.

“If we do not expand testing and identify those with the virus,” Professor Dissanayake observed, “the curfews would be useless.” He also stressed the urgent necessity to protect health workers. When health workers, without prior knowledge and experience and no protective equipment, are exposed to infected

patients then they have to be quarantined and cannot work, he warned.

Dissanayake pointed out that longer quarantine periods could be avoided if mass testing was introduced immediately. Several health workers—from the state and private sectors—are currently in quarantine.

Professor De Silva bluntly declared: “We cannot be complacent. We are sitting on the tip of the iceberg... We are not looking out to detect and track cases actively. We are passive: only a selected lot of those seeking treatment are tested. If we do not actively detect the iceberg, it will become a volcano.”

Dr. Rannan-Eliya commented: “More extensive testing means increasing our testing capacity by at least ten-fold so we can test up to 10,000 people a day in an emergency.” Infected people would keep entering Sri Lanka, he said, until “a global solution” was found. “We need to provide ample facilities for people to test and re-test and diagnose COVID-19 cases,” he stated.

Several doctors spoke to the WSWs yesterday, confirming the medical experts’ warnings. They complained about a lack of sufficient ventilators and test kits and pointed to the serious dangers facing medical workers.

Many health workers, the doctors explained, were using hurriedly made and substandard personal protective equipment (PPE), endangering their own lives and those of their patients. These conditions are the result of decades of cuts to health services by consecutive Sri Lankan governments.

While medical experts are calling for mass testing, the Rajapakse administration is mainly concentrating on “social distancing,” “tracing” and its lockdown and curfews. These measures are being enforced by the police and the military.

Colombo, Gampaha, and Kaluthara districts in the

Western Province, the Northern Jaffna district, Puttalam in the Northeast and the central Kandy district have all been named as “vulnerable zones” and are under total lockdown. Special Task Force police commandoes are being used for “security” in Colombo where barricades and patrols have been instituted.

The curfew was lifted in several districts for a few hours on Tuesday to allow people to buy essentials, which are, however, becoming scarce. Some of the communities that have been completely isolated include Atalugama village and five villages in Beruwela, in Kalutara district, Akurana in Kandy and the Darawela Tea Estate near Hatton.

The lockdown and curfews are creating enormous hardships for workers, the poor, the self-employed and other sections of society. There are no proper mechanisms for people to buy essentials. The mass of the population is simply ordered to obey government dictates, which are then enforced by the police and the military.

President Gotabhaya Rajapakse has appointed a Special Presidential Task Force, headed by his younger brother Basil Rajapakse. The task force has issued numerous statements about special “relief packages” for the needy. The packages contain a small quantity of dry rations, which are sold to raise money for the poor.

Samurdhi welfare program beneficiaries, who are paid a pittance by the government, have been promised a 10,000 rupee (\$US52) payment in April and May. The “payment” is an interest free loan that must be repaid in 18 months.

Workers and elderly people from the Theresa Estate in Bogawanthalawa in the Central Hills waited in line for about eight hours when the curfew was lifted yesterday. They were led to believe that they would be given a charity payment for the elderly and a relief package from the Samurdhi Department. No official turned up and they returned to their estate line room accommodation empty handed.

On Monday it was revealed during a discussion at the Badulla district government administrative office that the distribution of “relief packages” to villages and low-income groups in the municipal area had failed because no essential food items could be obtained.

Remote farmers from Girandurukotte village in Badulla told the WSWs that they have not received any relief. The farmers said that the village officer and local

policemen had collected food items from the farmers themselves and distributed them among several families.

About 800 farming families live in Girandurukotte. Many of the village youth have migrated to get work in Sri Lanka’s free trade zones or other jobs in the cities. Following the imposition of the lockdown and the closure of factories they have been forced to return home, but without any way of earning an income.

Last week the curfew required tens of thousands of free trade zone workers to stay inside their boarding houses. As workers’ anger began to mount, the government intervened and sent them back to their villages. The government, however, failed to ensure that the workers were paid last month’s wages and that they continue to receive their pay until the factories reopen.

President Rajapakse is using the coronavirus pandemic to step up the militarisation of his administration. At the same time, in the face of rising discontent, his government is bringing the “opposition” parties on board to assist in the suppression of the inevitable mass resistance to the lack of food and other essentials, including proper healthcare.

On March 24, the United National Party and its splinter group, the Jathika Samagi Balavegaya, along with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, the Tamil National Alliance and several Muslim parties, participated in an all-party meeting called by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse. All those in attendance pledged their support. The Sri Lankan prime minister has invited these organisations to attend another all-party conference today.



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