

Jaffna health workers complain of poor facilities as pandemic spreads in Sri Lanka

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Despite Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapakse's claims that the pandemic is under control and conditions are emerging to "reopen the economy," Sri Lanka is experiencing a surge in COVID-19 infections. A total of 598 cases were reported yesterday.

The government is deliberately carrying out a small number of tests so as to produce lower infection rates and downplay the risk posed by the pandemic. Sri Lankan medical experts, citing the World Health Organisation's (WHO) call for mass testing, have insisted the government should increase the number of daily tests to 5,000 at least. Only on Monday the Director of Health, Dr. Anil Jasinghe, boasted of having carried out 1,500 tests that day.

In the war-torn Northern Province, as in other parts of Sri Lanka, tests are carried out inadequately while quarantine centers are being maintained in dangerous conditions. As a result of the utterly insufficient number of tests, currently only 18 people have been identified to have COVID-19; more than 300 are being observed in quarantine centers.

During the 30 year bloody communal war waged in the north and east against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) by successive Sri Lankan governments, these region's rudimentary health infrastructure was almost destroyed. Since the end of war in May 2009, some hospitals have been improvised, including the Jaffna Teaching Hospital, the premier hospital in Jaffna district.

Consultant Community Physician Dr. Murali Vallipuranathan, the officer in charge of COVID-19 prevention in Jaffna, posted a note on Facebook on April 15 confirming the unsuitable conditions in quarantine centers with some photos.

The post, titled "Inaction of Medical Professional Bodies to intervene in the dormitory type of isolation

centers leads to cross-infections of coronavirus," reported that improper conditions in quarantine centers have led to the spread of the virus in the north.

It describes an incident involving twenty individuals who participated in a service near Jaffna conducted by a Swiss pastor who later tested positive for the virus. Vallipuranathan confirmed that when the group was tested upon admission to the quarantine centers on April 1 and 2, only six tested positive; they were transferred to Colombo. Another eight from that group tested positive two weeks later, on April 14.

He argues that the incident confirms that the later eight were infected while in quarantine, where conditions did not allow them to avoid contact with the others who were initially infected. Later he wrote a letter to the Sri Lanka Medical Association complaining that there are no proper staff with knowledge of public health and infection control in quarantine centers. The letter called for taking immediate steps to control the situation, pointing to the danger of spreading the virus in these centers.

Vallipuranathan's legitimate concerns immediately provoked an angry response from bureaucrats of the Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA), the main trade union for doctors in government service. GMOA general secretary Dr. Haritha Aluthge accused the Jaffna Community physician of having a "racist history" and "expressing views detrimental to the health department and Sri Lanka Army" and requested an investigation. This is nothing but a call for a Sinhala racist witch-hunt against a doctor for questioning the inadequacies of health facilities run by henchmen of Rajapakse.

As the head of the National Operational Center for the Prevention of COVID-19, Army Commander Shavendra Silva also expressed his anger at

Vallipurathan for pointing out shortcomings of the government's program. He said, "Since these centers are under the direct control of the military, we expected this type of allegation."

The military occupation of the north and east of Sri Lanka has continued since the end of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009. These provinces are under *de facto* military rule. President Rajapakse, who is exploiting the pandemic to build a military dictatorship, has appointed military officers arbitrarily to positions that should have been held by medical and health experts. Similarly, all quarantine centers in the north are also maintained by the armed forces. Medical personnel have not been given priority to intervene.

After the Swiss pastor conducted the service, the director of the Northern Provincial Health Service called a press conference with another group of doctors and said that the participants of that event should be tested as the pastor is suspected of having COVID-19. After most Tamil newspapers reported that media briefing, the chief police inspector of Jaffna telephoned the health inspector and threatened to arrest him, alleging that he had spread fear among the public based on false information.

GMOA branch leaders only raised the issue of the insufficiency of tests and risk of spreading the pandemic within the province because they were forced to do so by the doctors and other health workers who denounced their poor working conditions.

Speaking to Ceylon Today on April 23, Dr. T. Kandeepan, the GMOA's Northern Provincial Coordinator, expressed concern regarding the government's inability to increase the number of tests carried out in the district. He said that following the recent spread of COVID-19, where 18 patients tested positive and over 300 were sent for quarantine, there was still a dire need to increase the number of tests.

Kandeepan said, "Currently, only 20 tests are being done per day [in Jaffna district]" and stressed the necessity of expanding tests in the north. "We have tested 360 people in Jaffna. Based on that we can't say there is no community transmission. It is not acceptable in the opinion of medical authorities to say only those affiliated with the Swiss pastor are infected with virus. Testing should be increased by 3 to 4 times," he said.

As the epidemic grows, provincial health workers are concerned about the shortage of resources in hospitals.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site* on April 24, a nurse from Jaffna Teaching Hospital said: "Face masks and protective clothing are provided only to medical staff working at that ward. Medical personnel working in other units are wearing only face masks. Although COVID-19 patients haven't been admitted yet to the hospital, the personal protection provided will not be adequate in a situation where the outbreak could take place."



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