

Sri Lankan government rejects total lockdown amid surging COVID-19 infections

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Confronted with rising anger among workers, who forced the closure of an infected factory, Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse on Sunday announced an extension of a lockdown in selected areas and “home quarantine” for suspected cases. At the same time, he tried to blame ordinary people for the resurging COVID-19 pandemic in the country.

Last week, the MAS Holdings-owned Bodyline garment factory, which employs about 6,000 workers, was compelled to close down. One member of a 200-strong team tested positive. When 145 team members were tested, another 34 were found to be infected. Workers’ opposition forced the factory to shut.

MAS is a giant company, with factories in 15 countries employing around 99,000 workers, producing apparel for international brands such as Victoria’s Secret, Marks & Spencer and Calvin Klein.

Rajapakse made his announcement in a discussion with the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on COVID-19 at his office. The media ran reports painting those measures as the government intensifying “the battle against rapid spread of COVID-19.” In reality, the decisions are aimed at continuing corporate operations, particularly factory production for exports, forcing workers to stay on the job.

Basil Rajapakse, the president’s younger brother, who heads the PTF, said on Monday: “The majority opinion was to impose a nationwide curfew.” He added that health authorities wanted to “stop everything at least for 10 days.” However, the lockdown “was limited to the Western Province.”

Since one coronavirus infected worker was found accidentally on October 4 at a Brandix Fashion Wear factory at Minuwangoda, the number of cases nationally has rapidly increased, to over 12,000 with 24 deaths, as of Wednesday. These numbers understate the toll because the government is not conducting systematic testing.

The president extended a lockdown of the Western Province until November 9. Major commercial, industrial and administrative institutions are located in this province.

In the North-Western Province some areas in the Kurunegala district have been isolated also.

However, these restrictions do not affect big business or state institutions. Last week, President Rajapakse told the cabinet that economic activities would continue without hindrance, despite the pandemic. The Colombo government and the ruling class are following similar, criminal pro-business policies as their counterparts in other countries.

After the country felt the impact of the global coronavirus earlier this year, Rajapakse declared that the government had uniquely handled the pandemic and was able to control it, unlike other countries. Over recent weeks this lie has been exposed as the pandemic began to spread.

During the last nine months the government has taken no measures to overhaul the health system, which has been increasingly run down during the past four decades under successive governments.

Last week, the head of the National Operation Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak, Army Commander Shavendra Silva, said the first contacts of infected patients would undergo home quarantine but would not be sent to designated quarantine centres. That is because there is inadequate space and funds. Yesterday, it was reported that nearly 64,000 persons are already in “home quarantine.”

The government is not recommending systematic polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests for people in home quarantine. Tests should only be conducted on the 10th day of quarantine, the president has ordered.

Rajapakse cynically emphasised “the importance of conducting continuous and regular random tests.” Yet the government has just 25 PCR test machines, which can process about 8,000 samples daily, state health spokesman doctor Jayaruwan Bandara said. One machine was broken for days and only repaired this week.

An editorial in the pro-government *Island* newspaper indicated the run-down condition of the public health sector. It warned that limited intensive care units could be overwhelmed soon. “The country has only 641 hospitals with 84,728 beds (3.9 beds per 1,000 persons),” it stated,

“and most of them were overflowing with patients even before the COVID-19 outbreak. They usually have patients lying under beds and in corridors.”

There are only 91 medical officers and 212 nurses per 100,000 persons. The editorial added: “These numbers are not sufficient. Frontline health workers are burnt out, and some of them have even contracted COVID-19.”

Already, about 100 health workers, including doctors, nurses and other hospital employees, have been infected.

An incident recently reported in the Kaduwela area, near Colombo, demonstrated the impact of the government’s policies on the lives of the affected people. A man who tested positive for the virus had to stay at home for four days. When he called the relevant authorities, he was told there was “no room in hospitals.” He spent all four days outside his house, fearing that his wife and children would become infected.

The government last week decided to use a low-cost Rapid Antibody Test (RAT), which is not widely endorsed by epidemiologists. Sri Lankan medical expert Ravi Rannan Eliya told the *Daily Mirror*: “RAT tests are not as accurate as PCR, since a majority of those who tested positive are asymptomatic in Sri Lanka.”

Rajapakse is blaming ordinary people in order to cover up the responsibility of the government and the ruling class. At the meeting last Sunday he said: “This is not a virus dropped by the government. It is a worldwide health issue. People have a great responsibility. Obviously this situation has arisen because the people have given up that responsibility.”

Rajapakse’s priority is propping up the corporate elite, not funding the health sector. The government has released to big business, via the Central Bank, funds totalling 178 billion rupees, but for 2021 the government has allocated only 159 billion rupees (\$US873 million) for health expenditure.

At the same time, the government has set aside 500 billion rupees for the military and internal security agencies. The Rajapakse regime is preparing to suppress working class unrest.

The government is keeping the economy open for the benefit of the business elite, particularly for export production. Export Development Board chairman Prabhash Subasinghe last week said exporters should capitalise on the European Union’s recently extended Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP) tax concessions.

Sri Lankan exporters have a “natural hedge because of the GSP,” while “creating a cost advantage to the European importers,” Subasinghe said.

The EU is the biggest market for Sri Lankan exports, while the US is the largest importer of Sri Lankan textiles. Giant supply chains are reaping huge profits from apparel and

other imports from sweatshops in Sri Lanka, as well as those in Bangladesh, Vietnam and other impoverished countries.

Foreign investors, some in partnership with local big business, are running factories in Board of Investment (BOI) approved operations, including in free trade zones (FTZ), amid the deadly pandemic, with the Rajapakse regime’s blessing.

Some 1,615 factories outside the FTZs employ 580,000 workers, while 133,000 workers are employed inside FTZs. According to the BOI figures, however, only 28,670 PCR tests have been conducted among these more than 700,000 workers. Even with such low numbers of tests, more than 1,500 workers have tested COVID-19 positive.

According to BOI director general Sanjaya Mohottala: “All the factories in general are strictly adhering to health and safety guidelines. The BOI is strongly upholding the relevant regulations.”

The reality is the opposite. When the government announced the reopening of these factories at the end of April, the employers adopted minimum safety measures, only to abandon them within a few weeks.

It is on record that the Brandix Fashion Ware management did not allow workers at its Minuwangoda plant to seek medical treatment, even when hundreds of them showed symptoms of infection during September. When the company was compelled to carry out the testing of all workers in early October, more than 1,000 employees were found to be infected.

The only concern of the Rajapakse government and big business is the extraction of profit from workers’ labour power, not human lives.



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