

# Sri Lankan government orders schools to reopen, threatening thousands with COVID-19

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29 November 2020

The Sri Lankan government reopened schools last Monday, creating the conditions for a catastrophic spread of COVID-19 among school populations. The decision was taken in defiance of widespread opposition by parents, teachers and students.

The government closed all schools on March 13 in response to rising national concern over the rapid global spread of the highly infectious virus and reopened on July 6. Confronted three months later with a sudden increase in infections, the government closed them again on October 5.

Schools in the Western Province, where the highest number of cases have been reported, however, did not reopen and last week education authorities were forced to quickly close schools in other provinces.

All schools in Kandy city were closed a day after last Monday's "re-openings," along with several schools in Kurunegala district, Ambalangoda in the south, the central hills plantation area, Kilinochchi in the north and Kalmunai in the east.

On Tuesday, it was reported that the parents of two children from the same family attending two major schools in Ambalangoda tested COVID-19 positive. Almost all of the 8,000 students at those schools did not attend the following day. Twenty-five students and eight teachers from these schools are now in quarantine.

According to reports, only 10 percent of students attended Sri Lankan schools last Monday, indicating that most of the population had rejected Education Minister G.L. Peiris's "assurances" that schools were safe. Even after repeated urging by government health authorities and the media only about 50 percent of students had attended by Friday. Teacher attendances were also noticeably low, despite having been directed by education authorities to report for work.

COVID-19 cases are surging across the country with infections recorded at many state institutions and workplaces, including factories and universities, and in remote villages. The government, however, is attempting to conceal the real situation with an inadequate number of tests being carried out.

According to the current official figures, the number of infected in Sri Lanka is over 23,500 and the number of deaths is at 116. About 16,000 of these infections have been diagnosed since the beginning of October.

Education Minister Peiris, citing a World Health Organization (WHO) warning that the pandemic was expected to last for another two and a half years, declared that school closures this long would mean the "shutdown of children's futures."

The minister has no concern about the "children's future" but is attempting to dismiss the WHO's warnings to justify reopening schools but without adequate safety measures and testing regimes in place.

Earlier this month, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, like his counterparts around the world, declared that it was necessary to "carry out normal activities while controlling the disease." In other words, people should accept living with the deadly pandemic in order to maintain the profit interests of big business.

Rajapakse's mantra was repeated by the secretary to the education ministry, Kapila Perera, and Army Commander Shavendra Silva, head of the Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak Taskforce.

Appearing on national television last Wednesday, Silva was asked about how to change the population's attitude towards the "new normalcy." He responded by declaring, "We gave examples [to people] of how we have worked successfully during the pandemic."

Silva claimed that grade 5 scholarship and advance level

examinations were held without any problem. Limited reports, however, indicate that scores of teachers and students were infected during these examinations.

Colombo, in fact, has left it up to each school through a committee headed by the principal to decide on holding classes. Principals, however, have criticised the government, saying it was attempting to pass all responsibility for coronavirus infections in the schools onto the committees.

In another indication of its contemptuous attitude to students, teachers and their families, the government has only allocated 37 million rupees (\$US200,000) to more than 6,000 schools that reopened on Monday. If divided by the number of schools, this will not even cover one day's minimum healthcare at each school. Hand sanitation currently consists of water basins and soap that have been placed at the school entrances.

A majority of teachers and students attending school travel long distances each day on congested public transport services and in most schools up to 40 or 50 students share small class rooms.

Government "concerns" over the health and education of students are bogus. The budget allocation for health in 2021 is 30 billion rupees less than 187 billion rupees allocated in 2019 and education has been reduced from 166 billion rupees in 2019 to 126 billion in 2021. By contrast, spending on defence and the police will be 440 billion in 2021, up by about 50 billion from 2019.

Several teachers spoke last week to the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) about the school re-openings.

A teacher from Getambe school near Peradeniya, said: "There is total chaos in society. Most of the students travel by bus and, like the crowded classrooms, this is impacting on student attendance. Is the government trying to kill people? It has also used the pandemic to avoid paying teachers a salary increase."

Referring to the government's imposition of an Essential Services order on port workers, he added: "I denounce the forceful driving of port employees to work by declaring it an essential service."

A teacher from the Western Province explained that it was not possible to maintain safe physical distancing in schools: "The government claims that it has restarted schools out of concern for the people. This is a lie and aimed at assuring people that they now have to live with the pandemic. What is the limit? How far do we have to go with this? People have to fight against this situation."

A Madampa Central College teacher in Ambalangoda said: "We were instructed to hold online lessons during

the period when the schools were closed and although we did it, only 20 percent of students attended. Without providing the necessary technological facilities for students it is not possible to carry out this sort of undertaking."

A teacher from St. Joseph's College in Maskeliya said: "I strongly condemn the government decision to re-open the schools, particularly in this Maskeliya area, where my school is and several virus cases have been located. Our students are mostly plantation workers' children, who live in very poor housing conditions and without proper basic facilities."

There are four main teachers' unions in the plantation areas, including the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU), the Up-Country Teachers Forum, Up Country Teachers Federation, and a Ceylon Workers Congress-affiliated union. The St Joseph's College teacher explained that some of these unions had released statements calling on teachers and students to take safely measures themselves.

Although the CTU had criticised the government for not implementing proper safety measures, he said, all these unions had supported the government and the re-opening of schools.

On Monday the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) teachers' group issued a statement on the WSWS Sinhala language site entitled, "Oppose the reopening of schools under unsafe conditions! Build Safety Committees of Teachers Students and Parents to Save Lives from the pandemic!"

The statement called for the closing of all schools and universities until the pandemic was brought under control: full payment of the salaries of teachers and other employees; increased COVID-19 testing; proper facilities for online education; and the provision of adequate training for teachers to conduct online classes.

The statement explained that these demands would only be realised in struggle against the capitalist profit system and would involve the working class rallying the poor and oppressed mass in the fight for socialism and a workers' and peasants' government in Sri Lanka.



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