

# Colombo chief medical officer reveals Sri Lankan government's "herd immunity" policy

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Dr. Ruwan Wijayamuni, Chief Medical Officer of Colombo's Municipal Council, told Sri Lankan media last Sunday that his organisation has started testing people to find out whether they have "developed antibodies against COVID-19 after being exposed to it."

The tests are being conducted in collaboration with the Medical Faculty of Sri Jayewardenepura University. Speaking to the *Daily Mirror*, Dr. Wijayamuni said, "Unlike the first wave, we cannot wait till there are zero cases to lift the status of isolation. We have to live with the virus till an effective vaccine is found."

In other words, after following the "herd immunity" policy for the past 10 months, the Sri Lankan government is now directing health authorities to assess the results of its murderous program. President Gotabhaya Rajapakse has previously boasted that, unlike other countries, his government "controlled the pandemic."

Although shaken by the recent sudden increase in COVID-19 infections, the government is determined that major workplaces should be kept open so that corporate profit-making can continue unhindered.

Early this month, Rajapakse told a meeting of the Colombo Chamber of Commerce that it faced "the twin imperatives of containing the virus, on the one hand, and ensuring continued economic activity, on the other." He urged investors to take advantage of the "beneficial consequences" available in the "new normal."

The "herd immunity" policies promoted by the ruling elites everywhere have resulted in a massive increase in deaths and infections internationally. Yesterday the global death toll climbed to over 1.65 million and

confirmed cases to nearly 75 million.

The Sri Lankan government called for a reopening of the economy in late April and then lifted a total lockdown in May. Apart from the Western Province, all schools reopened on November 23. The end result was a huge rise in cases—from 3,000 in early October to more than 35,000 as of yesterday—and an increase of the death toll from 13 to 160 in the same period.

These comparatively small figures, however, are the result of low testing numbers. Instead of implementing aggressive testing, isolation and treatment, the government deliberately limited testing rates.

On December 2, the Health Policy Institute, a leading research body, released a report that rejected government claims about "effective control" of the pandemic. The report bluntly stated, "Sri Lanka's PCR test rate has never been sufficient to control the second wave of the pandemic."

The Western Province, which includes the capital Colombo, is now a hotbed for COVID-19. According to recent government data, 13,623, 7,272 and 1,855 people have been infected in the Colombo, Gampaha and Kalutara districts of the province.

Anyone travelling out of the province, which is the country's most populous and largest industrial centre, must self-quarantine for 14 days. Workers in the Western Province, however, have been directed to attend their workplaces, another criminal government policy to benefit the large corporations.

The increasing number of infections has overwhelmed hospitals allocated to treat COVID-19 patients. This week, the National Operations Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak, headed by Army Commander Shavendra, announced that it would "take-

over hospitals that can treat large number of people and rapidly convert them for COVID-19 treatment.”

On Sunday, police spokesman Ajith Rohana said that there were almost 96,000 people in home quarantine. Anyone violating the quarantine regulations, he said, was a “traitor” and would face a three-year jail term or a heavy fine.

The so-called “home quarantine” system was introduced last month after official quarantine centres were converted into treatment facilities. Many people confined to their homes, however, lack basic requirements and have been forced to leave their abodes to get food and other essentials. These mainly poor people are those that Rohana denounces as “traitors.”

Starving poor people confined to their flats in Colombo have demanded that the government provide them with adequate assistance in order to maintain their existence. Early this week, the authorities were forced to lift the lockdown of ten such flats.

Outbreaks have been reported at several factories, including major garment exporting plants. Since October, hundreds of infections have been discovered in factories owned by Brandix and MAS Holdings, two of the country's largest apparel manufacturers.

Hundreds of workers were also reported positive in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone, along with more than 40 new cases discovered at another export manufacturing zone in Seethawaka.

The dangerously low COVID-19 testing rate in factories monitored by the Board of Investment is threatening the lives of tens of thousands of workers and their families.

While over 700,000 workers are employed in these plants, under the official health authority protocols, “1 percent of the employees are to be subjected for PCR tests daily, or, 5 percent of the workforce to undergo PCR tests weekly.” The testing is being conducted under the supervision of a task group appointed by the navy.

Hundreds of thousands of plantation workers and their families are also facing the risk of contracting COVID-19.

By Tuesday, the number of infected people in Nuwara Eliya, the major plantation district, had risen to 304, mainly from the Norwood, Norton, Watawala, Agara Oya and Bogawantalwa estates. At least 47 tea

plantation workers have contracted COVID-19 at the Blackwater estate, near Ginigathhena in the central plantation district.

The government reopened schools on November 23, claiming that the country was safe. Since then it has had to close almost 300 schools after teachers and students tested positive. All schools in the Galle education zone and 140 schools in the country's North have also been closed because of infections.

Across Sri Lanka, teachers, students and parents are opposing the reopening of schools. According to provincial education authorities, the student attendance is less than 55 percent and in most provinces does not exceed 30 percent.

Rather than provide adequate funds to strengthen the neglected and rundown public health system, the Rajapakse government has slashed expenditure in the sector for next year by 28 billion rupees (\$US150 million).

The only way out of this escalating crisis is by mobilising the working class to rally the poor against the government's big business policies and its attempts to “normalise” the pandemic. This fight must be waged against the capitalists profit system and on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program. This perspective is fought for by the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka and its co-thinkers in the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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