

# As infections surge, highly contagious strain of COVID-19 confirmed in Sri Lanka

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With nearly 1,000 infections reported daily in Sri Lanka, the highly contagious British strain of COVID-19 has been confirmed to be found in several urban areas, including Colombo. This new variant has caused the pandemic to spread at an unprecedented rate throughout the world. According to Sri Lankan researchers, it will increase the rate of spread in the country by 50 percent.

As of Monday, the official figures, undoubtedly highly under-reported, stood at a total of 390 deaths and 75,209 infections. The government and media have seized on the relatively low figures to boast that Sri Lanka has achieved the 10th position in controlling the pandemic, but COVID-19 testing rates in the country are low.

Doctors and medical experts have warned that the country could face a health catastrophe due to inadequate health facilities and an acceleration of the pandemic's spread.

Institute for Health Policy (IHP) Executive Director Dr Ravindra Rannan-Eliya told *EconomyNext*: "Sri Lanka will have to step up its pandemic prevention measures without delay." He added: "There is a significant drop in numbers of PCR tests down to some 12,000 to 14,400 and we need massive increase in testing, up to 60,000 a day or more." Government has actually given up on any expansion of tests.

Speaking to the media on February 9, Dr. Haritha Aluthge, editor of the pro-government Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA), said that extraordinary numbers of patients were being reported and the risks had gone up in every province.

While the rate of COVID-19 infection was 3 percent before January, Aluthge said that it had reached 6 percent in January and 7 percent in recent days. "Now, there are 7-8 infections reported for every 100 PCR

tests" he said. While there were 112 deaths in January, about 50 deaths were reported in the first week of February. One reason for increasing infection rates was the delay in the results of PCR tests, Aluthge said.

On February 10, Ravi Kumudesh, the president of Medical Laboratory Professionals Union, reported that already 6,000 PCR samples were stuck at the Medical Research Institute (MRI) without the release of results. "It seems like they have given up on PCR testing the way they did earlier," he told *EconomyNext*. "They are focused on other things. The interest to conduct PCR tests is gone."

Elaborating, Kumudesh said: "For about two months now, [the] reagents needed for PCR testing have not been supplied to the Mulleriyawa lab. As a result, that lab is no longer operating. An extraction machine at the Bandaranaike International Airport (BIA) is also not being used, which is a big blow to PCR testing there."

This dangerous situation is a direct result of government's policies that dictate the masses should live under the "new normal" with the economy being opened despite the spread of the virus. The trade unions have issued statements supporting the government's policies. *Lankadeepa* reported on February 9 that there were 800 biosamples piled at the Badulla General Hospital because of the lack of PCR machines to carry out tests. Dr. Shantha Gamagedara, a specialist at that hospital, said that there was a delay of three days to release the PCR test results from the one machine.

Most at risk are workers forced to work under unsafe conditions in the factories and workplaces. Among the samples at the general hospital in Badulla district are those of the workers of a garment factory in Rideemaliyadda, a remote area in the district.

The government opened the schools on November 23 throughout the island's provinces, except in the

Western Province. As the cases are rising throughout the country and the situation in the Western Province is worsening, all the schools should have been closed. However, Education Minister G.L. Peiris announced on February 10 that schools in the Western Province would also be opened on March 15 with a few exceptions.

Students, teachers and parents have expressed concerns about the opening of schools. When the new school term started on January 11, only 55 percent of students attended. The attendance of students and teachers only went up after a barrage of propaganda by authorities and the media. Teachers unions are also tacitly supporting the opening of schools under unsafe conditions.

Garment factories, at which thousands of workers are employed, have become epicentres of the pandemic. Reports are emerging daily of infections in garment factories but it is treated as normal in the media. Workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the pandemic was spreading at the Vanavil MAS garment factory in Killinochchi in the Northern Province but the company was still not prepared to close the factory.

The concern of factory owners is not the health and lives of workers, but export targets and profits.

The chairperson of the Joint Apparel Association Forum Sri Lanka, A. Sukumaran, recently told a panel discussion: “There is a global demand for apparel but Sri Lanka is falling short in meeting deadlines and important clients are moving towards competitors who are supplying without any delay.”

The policies of the government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse are dictated by the demands of big business to maintain production and profits amid a rising toll of infections and deaths.

The working class should fight for the closure of all non-essential services, factories and schools with full compensation for those workers who lose their income. In essential services, including health sector, full protection from the virus must be provided. Billions of rupees must be allocated for social services including health care. The COVID-19 vaccine should be provided to all free of charge.

The year-long experience of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the utter bankruptcy of the capitalist system. Along with creating unnecessary death and disease, the ruling class has exploited the pandemic to

impose new burdens on the backs of working people. Even the provision of the vaccine has been subordinated to the profit interests of big companies and the requirements of capitalist regimes.

The only solution for the working class is to fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies, based on need not profit, as part of the struggle for socialism internationally.



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