

Sri Lankan government imposes censorship as experts warn of coronavirus surge

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The Sri Lankan government on Monday announced “travel restrictions” for the next two weeks, until June 7, in response to surging coronavirus infections. It followed calls by medical experts for a “strict lockdown” of the island. President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, however, has warned state officials not to make any unauthorised media statements, claiming it could intensify popular concern about COVID-19.

The official total number of coronavirus infections in Sri Lanka has climbed to over 167,170 with more than 1,240 deaths. In the last five days, the daily average of new infections spiked to over 3,300 with an increase of 65,000 cases, or a 70 percent rise, in the past month.

State Minister of Health Sudarshini Fernandopulle has admitted that there were “about three times as many patients in society as reported.” Her statement was in response to repeated statements by medical experts that the real number of coronavirus infections and deaths was much higher than officially reported. The number of COVID-19 infections is also inaccurate because the government has directed health authorities to use the limited PCR (polymerase chain reaction) test.

Last week, the Colombo office of the World Health Organization (WHO) held what it called a “brainstorming session” about Sri Lanka’s COVID-19 situation. More than a dozen epidemiologists and other medical experts participated, including Dr. Olivia Nieveras and Dr. Palitha Abeykoon from the WHO Colombo office, and Professors Malik Peiris, Nilika Malavige and Dr. Padma Gunaratne.

These highly-qualified experts called on the government to introduce “strict restrictions on non-essential human mobility” with a two- or three-week lockdown in high transmission areas, and an expansion of medical facilities with intensive care units. “The decisions we take now will affect the lives of millions

of Sri Lankans,” they warned.

“The public sector health system is stretched to the limit, making it difficult to manage COVID-19 cases as well as other essential services. More health professionals and preventive staff (e.g., public health inspectors) are getting infected and HR [human resources] policies need to be geared to meet the urgency. There is a ‘tipping point’ beyond which the system can rapidly go out of control,” the experts stated.

This tipping point, in fact, is rapidly being reached. According to reports, thousands of infected patients are being told to stay at home due to the lack of hospital beds. Health workers are increasingly unable to deal with the worsening situation.

Sri Lanka’s health care infrastructure has been run down by successive governments which have slashed health spending. In this year’s budget, the Rajapakse government cut health by 28 billion rupees (\$US140 million) and only allocated 10 billion rupees or 0.1 percent of gross domestic product to contain the pandemic. At the same time, it announced plans to increase defence and police spending to 440 billion rupees in 2021, up from 393 billion rupees in 2019.

A joint call for a 14-day lockdown was issued by the Sri Lanka Medical Association, Association of Medical Specialists, Sri Lanka Medical Intercollegiate Committee and Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA).

The GMOA, the main doctors’ union, added its name in response to public criticism by its members over the association’s backing of the government’s dangerous policies and its ignoring of pandemic-related problems in the hospitals.

The government’s two-week lockdown announcement has been accompanied by growing calls

for censorship.

Addressing a COVID-19 taskforce meeting last Friday, President Rajapakse declared that “responsible officials should not unnecessarily hold media briefings and panic the public about the pandemic.” Officials should directly contact him if there was a problem, he said.

Army commander General Shavendra Silva, who is head of the COVID-19 prevention taskforce, also criticised medical officials for holding press conferences without informing the president. Rajapakse appointed Silva task force chief in March 2020, marginalising health officials and placing the government’s response to the pandemic under military control.

Last week, Health Ministry Secretary Dr. S.H. Munasinghe, an in-service major general, issued a circular threatening disciplinary action against health officials who made media statements that violated the ministry’s “rules and regulations.”

State Health Minister Fernandopulle insisted that there was no government censorship, but added that the media had a “responsibility” to publish factual and accurate information.

The Rajapakse government is clearly nervous about the growing popular opposition to its increasingly reckless and criminal response to the deadly pandemic and is attempting to stifle any criticism of its policies.

After announcing the new COVID-19 travel restrictions, Rajapakse declared that steps had to be taken to “keep factories open.” On the same day his brother, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, told senior Central Bank officials “not [to] let the country fall, despite the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Colombo’s determination to keep its export factories operating—the apparel industry in particular—is taking a terrible toll on workers. This was revealed at MAS Holdings, the giant Sri Lankan and South Asian-based export apparel producer. While the company earned over \$US1 billion in revenue last year, hundreds of its workers have tested COVID-19 positive at many of its Sri Lankan plants.

This includes 380 workers at Thulhiriya Thuruli, 300 at Biyagama Active Linea Intimo, 450 at Panadura Unichela, 100 at Pannala Slimline, 22 at Kilinochchi Vanavil. These factories employ between 2,000 and 3,000 people so many more workers are likely to be

infected.

Hundreds of workers have also been infected in Sri Lanka’s free trade zones. Some of these factories were only closed after employees refused to keep working in the unsafe facilities.

Labour Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva hypocritically told the media that he had ordered health officials to inquire into whether the Thuruli factory management had followed guidelines. The factory, in fact, had only carried out PCR tests of its workforce. When three employees were privately tested, they discovered that they had been infected.

In March, President Rajapakse met with apparel factory owners and discussed “looking into the possibility of relaxing certain health guidelines imposed on the garment sector without affecting the public health conditions of the country.”

The Rajapakse administration, like its counterparts across the sub-continent and internationally, will do whatever is necessary to maintain company profits. As Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared last month, even as a tsunami of coronavirus infections and deaths swept across his country, “we have to save the country from lockdown”—in other words, capitalist profits take precedence over human lives.



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