

Sri Lankan government to remove pandemic restrictions despite continuing Delta variant infections

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The Sri Lankan government is preparing to abandon its limited pandemic restrictions, despite continuing infections of the highly-contagious Delta variant across the island.

On July 5, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse said that he would fully reopen the country by September, claiming that by that time everyone over 30 years of age would be vaccinated. “To face the pandemic, the only solution is the vaccination,” he declared, but then added: “Without opening the country we cannot sustain the economy.”

In May last year, the government, in response to big business demands, fully reopened the economy. It was forced, however, to later impose some restrictions because the reopening paved the way for a sharp surge of infections and deaths.

Rajapakse’s moves to do away with existing restrictions defy numerous warnings from the World Health Organization (WHO) and Sri Lankan health experts.

On July 2, WHO director Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned against governments adopting a “vaccination is the only solution” policy.

“Public health and social measures like strong surveillance, strategic testing, early case detection, isolation and clinical care remain critical as well as masking, physical distancing, avoiding crowded places and keeping indoor areas well-ventilated are the basis for the response,” he told international media.

Delta variant infections are rapidly increasing around the world, including in the US, the UK and Israel, which have vaccinated much of their populations but have seriously reduced COVID-19 precautions.

The main concern of the cash-strapped Rajapakse

government and the capitalist class, which face a deepening economic crisis, is not protecting Sri Lankan lives but boosting profits. Last week President Rajapakse appointed his younger brother Basil as the new finance minister whose task will be to further bolster big business and intensify the government’s attacks on living conditions.

According to the *Daily Mirror*, Basil Rajapakse met with some ministers yesterday and “emphasised the need to revitalise the manufacturing base of the country as otherwise the government would fall short of money to run the economy.”

Director General of Health Service Dr. Asela Gunawardena has further relaxed COVID-19 regulations by allowing cinemas, theatres, swimming pools, day care centres and museums to be opened with 25 percent capacity. All Sri Lankan factories are now fully operating, including the garment industry, which has continued without restriction since May 2020.

Education Minister G. L. Peiris yesterday announced that the vaccination program has been expedited and that all Sri Lankan schools will be reopened in August.

Colombo is attempting to paint a rosy picture of COVID-19 infections. This is false and dangerous. The total number of coronavirus infections rose to 274,538 on July 11 with 1,507 new cases that day and the seven-day daily average stands at 1,273. In the past ten days, 500 people have died from virus, including 33 on July 11, taking the total death toll to 3,467.

The number of infections and deaths in Sri Lanka, however, are not properly reported because of the low level of polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing, a deliberate government policy. On July 11, for example, there were only 13,777 PCR tests.

Sri Jayawardenepura University immunology and molecular department head Dr. Chandima Jeewandara reported yesterday that 20 Delta cases were discovered in Colombo with new test samples still to be examined.

Public Health Inspectors Union leader Upul Rohana told the *Daily Mirror* yesterday that the situation was serious and that Sri Jayawardenepura University health officials were downplaying information on Delta variant infections.

On July 3, 14 Delta variant infections were detected in a batch of 142 samples from across the country. As well as Colombo, Delta cases were reported in Galle, Matara and Trincomalee, which means the deadly variant has spread to many areas of the island.

Independent health expert Dr. Ravi Rannan-Eliya responded with a Twitter comment: “It’s worrying that one in ten of 142 samples from all over the island were Delta. Don’t know the details, but strongly suggest we now have several hundred or thousand Delta cases in the country.” He warned: “We should be doing everything we can to control this.”

On July 5, a garment worker from the Koggala Special Economic Zone, where almost 12,000 workers are employed, was found to be infected with the Delta variant. Economic zone director Sisil Fernando insisted there was no danger of other workers being infected because a vaccination program was underway, indicating that production would continue at the factory.

Employers, with the blessing of the government, have not shut their plants after the discovery of infections. In fact, factory closures have only occurred when employees refused to work in unsafe conditions. Those plants, with the full backing of the trade unions, soon reopened.

The Sri Lankan media is fully supporting the government and big business’s criminal reopening policies. A July 5 editorial entitled “Living with Covid-19” in the *Daily Mirror* praised the Singapore government’s abandonment of basic pandemic safety measures.

“They propose scrapping lockdowns and mass contact tracing, to allow for a return to quarantine-free travel and the resumption of large gatherings... it even wants Singapore to stop the count of daily Covid-19 cases,” the editorial gleefully declared.

The Singapore government taskforce “proposes

changing the pandemic into something less threatening, to something like influenza, foot and mouth disease, or chickenpox,” the newspaper continued. “The Singapore model is different, and the math seems to add up... Perhaps it’s time to look east for solutions.”

Next day the *Daily Mirror* published a comment by P.K. Balachandran which endorsed this strategy and the Rajapakse government’s moves. “As in the West... no room should be given to paranoia about the virus. Paranoia will damage public morale and their confidence in the future.”

Balachandran praised the government and declared that it was important to “resist the temptation to reimpose lockdowns and movement restrictions... which will only retard the economy, affect income generation.” He referred to the murderous “herd immunity” policy, which has led to the death of millions of people around the world, as the “solution.”

The working class must reject the Rajapakse government’s herd-immunity agenda which is backed by every faction of the ruling class. There is no national solution to the pandemic under the capitalist system where profits take precedence over human life.

Sri Lankan workers must unite with their class brothers and sisters internationally and fight for their own independent interests. This requires the building of action committees in every workplace to establish genuine COVID-19 safety measures and for the closure of non-essential production with laid off workers paid a decent living wage. This struggle must be taken forward in line with the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees as advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

In this struggle, Sri Lankan workers must rally the rural masses and the poor and fight for socialist policies—that is, to take the control of the banks, large estates and big companies, repudiate foreign debts and reorganise society for the benefit of the majority. The Socialist Equality Party alone fights for this perspective.



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