Delta variant spreads in Sri Lanka, as government lifts health restrictions

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On July 15, Dr. Hemantha Herath, Sri Lanka's deputy director general of health services announced that all remaining health restrictions would be relaxed, even though the highly infectious coronavirus Delta variant was being detected in several districts across the island.

"Keeping the country closed indefinitely is not going to help at all," Herath told the *Daily Mirror*. He insisted that "people should take the responsibility" for ensuring "social and economic activities are carried out without leaving any room for the spread of the disease." He failed to explain, however, what workers and the poor could do to prevent COVID-19 spreading in the absence of the restrictions.

Herath stressed the necessity for "achieving economic goals," and that relaxation of the restriction was in order "to find money"—in other words, profits and the economy take precedence over public health.

On Tuesday, Herath admitted that between 20 and 30 percent of COVID-19 cases involved the Delta B.1.617.2 variant. Apart from Colombo, the deadly variant has been found in the Jaffna and Kilinochchi districts in the North and in Galle and Matara in the South. The current numbers are deceptive because health authorities have been directed to conduct lower numbers of PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests.

Herath's call for the removal of all health restrictions and unrestricted economic activity by big business, slavishly echoes the government's line. Like its capitalist counterparts around the world, the Rajapakse government has placed the pursuit of profit before human life.

On July 5, President Rajapakse told a meeting of co-operative society representatives that it was necessary to "face the pandemic, the only solution is the vaccination." "Without opening the country we cannot sustain the economy," he said.

Confronted with worsening economic problems, the Rajapakse regime is desperate to drive up production and boost exports in order to maintain foreign loan repayments.

The Delta variant has now been detected in over 110 countries, with the World Health Organisation warning that the new and highly-transmissible variant will quickly become dominant in the coming period. Highly-vaccinated countries are currently seeing an upsurge of Delta cases.

Medical specialists in Sri Lanka have warned that the island faces an explosive outbreak as a result of the removal of health restrictions, low testing rates and neglect of other important health and safety measures.

Yesterday, Professor Padma Gunaratne, president of the prestigious Sri Lanka Medical Association (SLMA), warned that the island faced the beginning of a "fourth wave" of the coronavirus and its Delta variant.

"There was no significant decline in the number of COVID positive cases," she said, because of the shortcomings of current health restrictions. The SLMA has called for an effective lockdown of the country but is being ignored by the government.

Gunaratne warned that vaccines alone would not protect the population. "We cannot think of moving forward in the country [and just resume] our social activities like before the start of the pandemic. Having such thoughts is a myth," she warned.

Dr. Ravi Rannan-Eliya, executive director of the Institute for Health Policy, issued similar cautions in an interview with the *Island* on Monday. "Given that even highly vaccinated countries, like the UK, the USA, and Israel are experiencing explosive outbreaks of Delta variant, Sri Lanka needs to be especially vigilant," he said.

Rannan-Eliya explained: "The simple answer is aggressive testing, contact tracing and isolation," adding that vaccination alone was not the answer. He warned that health authorities were "doubling down on cutting testing,

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maybe with the mistaken hope that case numbers will fall as a result."

The health ministry reported yesterday that the total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases was 289,577 with 3,917 deaths. Daily cases recorded in recent days are around 1,400 but this is based on lower testing. Since March 2020, 10 babies have died at Lady Ridgway Hospital, the country's premier children hospital and 13 pregnant women have also become victims.

On Tuesday, only 9,000 PCR tests were conducted, down from the 12,000 daily on the previous three days. The reduction in PCR testing is in defiance of experts urging that there should be around 60,000 each day for effective tracing. The highest number of daily tests carried out in Sri Lanka has been 25,000 and then for just two days.

The government's health expenditure is a pittance with only 28 billion rupees ($US140 million) allocated in the 2021 budget, and only 10 billion rupees, or 0.1 percent of gross domestic product, added in response to COVID-19.

The government's reaction to the crisis has created the conditions for the rapid spread of the virus. Thousands became infected after last year's rapid reopening of the economy in mid-April, following a brief and limited national lockdown during which most garment factories remained open.

In June 2020, as infections were rapidly spreading across the country, President Rajapakse called on provincial governors and district administrative officers to fully support ongoing production at factories and all development projects. These facilities should not be immediately shut down "if an infected person is detected," he declared.

The media reported earlier this month that 23 workers were infected at the Sisalu Fashion garment factory in Medirigiriya, a remote area in the North Central Province. The health officials, however, sent those workers to quarantine centres but ruled out any closure of the factory. Ten days later workers reported feeling ill at the same plant and it was discovered, after limited tests, that 124 workers were infected.

Big business is reaping high profits from the government's policies. On Monday, Export Development Board chairman Suresh de Mel boasted that export revenue was $5.6 billion in the first half of 2021, an increase of 27.5 percent compared to same period last year. He voiced his appreciation for this contribution to the economy, "despite the severe third wave of COVID-19."

The trade unions fully supported last year's reopening of the economy, backing the demands of big business and government and scuttling workers' struggles and protests. All the opposition parliamentary parties, including the United National Party, Samagi Jana Balawegaya and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, and the pseudo-left groups have similarly backed these reactionary policies that place profits ahead of human life.

The Rajapakse government and the rest of the Sri Lankan political establishment, aided and abetted by the unions, are creating the conditions for a greater catastrophe for workers and the poor.

To confront these dangers, the Sri Lankan working class must take the initiative. All non-essential production must be closed with full compensation to all employees in these workplaces and institutions. Those working in the essential services must be given the necessary protective equipment and safety measures must be implemented to fully protect their health, and the rest of the community.

Small businesses and the self-employed must be paid adequate compensation. Schools must be closed but online education facilities provided to all students. Billions of rupees are needed to improve health services.

Action committees must be established, independent of the trade unions, at workplaces and in the large estates to take forward the fight for these policies. This struggle must be linked to the fight for socialist policies. Sri Lanka workers can successfully take forward this perspective only by uniting with the international working class. We urge workers and youth to join the Socialist Equality Party and take forward this program.

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