

Sri Lankan president opposes lockdowns, as Delta variant spreads

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Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse has rejected increasingly strident calls by medical experts for lockdowns, to deal with rapidly rising COVID-19 deaths and infections, and an impending breakdown of the health system.

On July 5, Rajapakse removed many coronavirus travel restrictions, and on July 28, directed all state employees working from home to return to their workplaces. The government's removal of virtually all remaining limited restrictions has added fuel to the pandemic, which is now accelerating, with the highly-infectious Delta variant.

Addressing the media last Friday, following a high-level meeting to review the health emergency, Army chief General Shavendra Silva declared: "The president is not in favour of [a] countrywide lockdown." Silva is the head of the National Operation Centre for Prevention of COVID-19.

Rajapakse, who attended the meeting, reportedly only offered advice on how to "solve" hospital congestion. The meeting decided to reduce the number of people allowed to attend weddings and funerals, and postponed state functions.

Rajapakse has flatly rejected urgent appeals by medical experts for lockdowns and stricter safety, amid a rapidly increasing daily death toll, with 656 deaths reported in the past six days. Yesterday, the total number of deaths hit 5,464, up from 3,268 on July 5, and the total number of infections rose to 342,079, an increase by 83,380 during the same period.

These figures, however, are not an accurate reflection of the real situation, because the government has deliberately limited testing and tracing. While medical experts are demanding at least 40,000 daily PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests per day, health officers in the past month have only been able to conduct less than half that number.

Immunologist Dr. Chandima Jeewandara revealed last week that 19.3 percent of those testing positive for COVID-19 in the Colombo district, during the first week of July, were infected with the Delta variant. In the last week of July, the figure increased to 75 percent. In a Twitter message on August 4, he warned that 56 of 94 random samples, analysed from across the island, were infected with the

deadly variant.

Last week, Sri Lanka Medical Association President Professor Padma Gunaratne insisted on the urgency of imposing travel restrictions. She is one of many medical experts that have consistently called for lockdowns.

"Two weeks ago, we said that a surge had begun with the Delta variant. Now, after two weeks, we are warning about what could happen in two weeks," she said. The variant was spreading fast in the heavily-populated Colombo and Gampaha districts, she added, and warned that unless travel restrictions were imposed the situation would escalate out of control.

Sri Lankan hospitals are being overwhelmed. Last weekend, the National Hospital of Sri Lanka in Colombo was treating around 500 patients, up from about 200 the previous week. Additional wards have been allocated to deal with the increase, limiting hospital treatment for other patients.

Colombo South Hospital in Kalubowila is at capacity, with grim images of infected patients sitting in plastic chairs, surrounded by their belongings, on the lawns of the facility and others lying on ward corridor floors.

Colombo South Hospital director Dr. Sagari Kiriwandeniya told Derana TV on Saturday that the facility had stopped routine surgeries, in order to deal with the flood of COVID-19 patients. Asked what would happen if more wards were allocated for coronavirus cases, she bluntly stated: "Then not only COVID-19 patients, but others, will die."

About 45,000 children under 18 years have been infected, and 14 have died in Sri Lanka since the outbreak of COVID-19 early last year, Dr. Deepal Perera, from the Lady Ridgeway Hospital for children, told the *Daily Mirror*. The facility, which is being overwhelmed, has been forced to send many of the children to other hospitals.

Hospital mortuaries have reached capacity and are storing bodies in outside freezers. The Colombo North Ragama Hospital management told the Director General of Health Services last week that the facility faced an unbearable

situation, warning that dead bodies in outside freezers would decay, creating other health problems.

External freezers storing bodies at the Kalutara and Panadura hospitals are also full. Panadura's mayor told the media that the city had increased its cremations from two to six per day, but did not have the capacity to cremate corpses from Kalutara hospital. Concerns are also being raised that some crematoriums, which are working round the clock, could break down.

Upul Rohana, head of the public health inspectors' union, told the media that one of the union's members telephoned to complain that he had spent a whole night near a crematorium. This meant that many health inspectors were not available for contact tracing, because they had to supervise bodies until they were cremated.

Government ministers and parliamentarians, in a desperate attempt to show that the situation was under control, are visiting hospitals, arranging cremations in some areas and asking hospital administrations to allocate more wards for COVID-19 patients. Health authorities have also begun making arrangements for so-called home-based COVID-19 treatment. The result, however, will be more infections and deaths.

Addressing a press conference, Deputy Director General of Health Services Dr. Hemantha Herath denied that the situation in hospitals was dire. He was asked by one journalist to "comment candidly on the situation Sri Lankans would face in the coming days." He refused to provide any detailed information and, according to a report in the *Island*, responded that "he might not be allowed to speak to the media again if he spoke candidly about the trajectory of the pandemic in the coming days."

President Rajapakse, in fact, had previously warned health ministry officials and medical experts not to "panic" people about the pandemic, but directly inform him of any problems.

Parliamentary opposition parties, which from the outset have supported the Rajapakse government's response to the pandemic, including its reopening of the economy, are now making hypocritical appeals to Colombo to impose a lockdown.

Parliamentarian Tissa Attanayake, from Samagi Jana Balawegaya, the main opposition party, has called on the government to "take proactive measures to lock down" and save lives.

Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) Politburo member Nalinda Jayatissa has called for a two-week lockdown to reduce hospital caseloads "to a manageable level." Tamil National Alliance MP S.P. Rasamanickam declared, "If the health experts recommend a lockdown, the government should abide and comply."

These parties are seeking to exploit and derail the growing mass outrage against the Rajapakse regime's criminal indifference towards the health and safety of millions of Sri Lankans.

Last year, following the outbreak of coronavirus infection on the island, these parties participated in an all-party conference, called by the Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, and extended their full support. The JVP-controlled trade unions and other unions attended meetings with employers, called by the labour minister to decide on wage and job cuts and extensions of working hours in the name of saving the big companies.

An editorial in last weekend's *Sunday Times* reflected the nervous concerns of sections of the ruling elite to the worsening coronavirus catastrophe: "Some hotels are having functions with bands playing and air-conditioning blasting, while other hotels (used by private hospitals as intermediate care centres) are filled with COVID patients carrying saline bottles. It is almost like the sinking of the Titanic, while the band played on: A tale of two cities."

The editorial blamed the Rajapakse administration for creating a false sense of security and for insisting "that the mass vaccination program will settle the spike of positive." It concluded by declaring that the government "must act, and act decisively, to ensure the galloping new variant does not reach a tipping point, a point of no return, by its shortsightedness."

These concerns are not animated by social health considerations, but fears that the policies of the Rajapakse government—for which the entire ruling class is responsible—will produce a social explosion.

Rajapakse's insistence that "vaccination is the only solution to keep the economy open" is his response to the devastating economic impact of the pandemic, with a collapse of exports, tourist industry earnings and remittances, and \$US4 billion in annual foreign debt repayments over the next four years.

The Rajapakse regime, like every government around the world, is sacrificing the lives of workers and the poor to boost big-business profits and maintain its commitments to international finance capital.



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