Sri Lankan president reluctantly imposes pandemic lockdown

K. Ratnayake
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In a sudden "special address" on Friday evening, Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse declared a 10-day limited national lockdown in response to rising coronavirus infections and deaths.

Rajapakse's speech came after he had consistently rejected repeated appeals by independent medical experts for the imposition of stringent restrictions to save the population from rising numbers of Delta variant infections.

Rajapakse made clear that he was reluctantly imposing the lockdown because the national economy was in tatters. He warned that the population had to be "prepared to make more sacrifices" if longer lockdowns were required.

Between August 1 and 23, Sri Lanka's official number of coronavirus infections increased by 85,516 and the death toll climbed by 2,838. These numbers are relentlessly rising in line with climbing infections and deaths globally from the Delta variant.

Colombo fuelled the spread of the virus by removing remaining travel restrictions on July 5 and on August 2 ordering all state employees working from home to return to their usual workplaces. Sri Lanka's rundown health system is now unable to cope with the overflowing numbers of coronavirus patients.

Rajapakse's decision on Friday to announce a limited national lockdown is not out of sympathy for people but in response to developing working-class unrest which is escalating towards a showdown with the government. Opposition to the government has increased in line with reports of rising infections and deaths in various workplaces. Last Wednesday, thousands of health workers protested demanding an immediate lockdown.

Fearing that the situation would escalate out of control, several trade unions in the health, railways, banks, education, postal, electricity and private sectors issued a joint "ultimatum" demanding the president implement a "scientific lockdown." If the government failed to heed this demand, the unions said they would direct their members to stay at home.

These unions, however, had previously endorsed "reopening" of the economy in mid-April last year and supported the continued operations of big business. They only began calling for the imposition of increased restrictions and COVID-19 health and safety measures two weeks ago.

By their silence, they also in effect backed the Rajapakse government's draconian Essential Public Services Act that has banned strikes in almost all state institutions. Their lockdown call is aimed at deflecting the mounting anger among workers and saving big business and the Rajapakse regime.

Rajapakse did not utter a word of concern about the rising death toll or health catastrophe, offer condolences to bereaved families who have lost loved ones, or sympathise with those undergoing immense hardships. Instead, he arrogantly posed as a saviour of those impacted by COVID-19 claiming to be doing everything to protect them.

In line with the daily mantras uttered by governments around the world, Rajapakse declared that the people "have to understand the reality," that all countries "are adapting to the method of 'New Normal'" and people have to "live with the virus." In other words, workers must keep toiling and ensure that big business continues boosting their profits.

"The only solution is vaccination," he said, while falsely claiming that this was "the accepted opinion of the World Health Organisation, the majority of medical experts and… the global standardized methodology."

Rajapakse said that the government was importing enough vaccines to ensure 100 percent of those over 30 years would be vaccinated by 10 September. After that health authorities would begin giving doses to all those between 18 and 30 years of age.

With this development, the number of patients and the number of deaths will "decrease," he declared. Rajapakse has since admitted that so far only 43 percent of those vaccinated have received both doses.

While vaccination is an important tool to combat the COVID-19 it cannot by itself eradicate the pandemic anywhere in the world. The working class everywhere needs

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a program to eradicate this deadly virus.

Much of Rajapakse's 16-minute speech consisted of explaining the economic crisis facing the regime and the capitalist class and why lockdowns and restrictions were anathema.

Sri Lanka, he said, last year faced its lowest economic growth since independence in 1948: $US5 billion in foreign revenue generated by the apparel sector was "gravely affected;" tourism, worth $4.5 billion annually had collapsed; and local and foreign investment had been lost.

Medium and small businesses, which contributes 50 percent to the gross domestic product, were also affected, he added. Around 4.5 million people in tourism, daily wage earners and self-employed had lost their sources of income.

Rajapakse then cynically declared that the government had not "abdicated its responsibility," but provided relief payments of 5,000 rupees ($25) and spent a total of 30 billion rupees. These sums, which were paid three times last year to a limited number of families, can only be described as starvation payments. Desperate families were forced to pawn whatever valuables they had.

He then shamelessly insisted that families forced into quarantine had been paid 10,000 rupees for two weeks supplies of essentials, an utterly inadequate amount for families attempting to deal with the health crisis.

Revealingly, Rajapakse said the government has "not taken any action to reduce the salaries or curtail the allowances of more than 1.4 million public servants." The fact the president mentioned wage and allowance cuts indicates that was—and is—under consideration.

In line with placing the burden of the crisis on the masses, the government is increasing the price of essentials, such as rice, flour, lentils, potatoes, dry fish, and fuel, including gas. Shortages of essentials have been reported.

The president carefully avoided any reference to the government's lavish concessions to big business and investors. Providing cheap credit and tax concessions, and allowing them to cut wages and jobs, generated huge profits. Last year, Sri Lanka's nine largest companies earned 80 billion rupees in profit, with the prospect of higher profits this year.

Rajapakse said that the government had continued paying an average of $4 billion a year in foreign debt repayments, maintaining its commitments to international financial institutions.

Revealing why his government was reluctant to impose strict lockdown measures, Rajapakse said: "A large number of orders have been received by the apparel industry in the export sector. If we are not able to deliver these orders on time, we may lose a large amount of foreign exchange."

Rajapakse is desperately attempting to defend the profit interests of not only the apparel industry but the ruling elite and capitalist system as a whole by placing profits ahead of human lives.

Ending his speech, Rajapakse made an appeal for national unity and issued a veiled threat: "This situation is not a rivalry or conflict between different ideologists, trade unions, doctors, other health officials and the government… This [is] not a time for strike actions and protests. Do not attempt to destabilize the country… The health sector looks at this issue from one angle, we as a government will have to manage the small economy in our country."

Health workers have been at the forefront of escalating protests across the country in recent months, demanding health protections and other improvements in order to deal with the unprecedented health emergency.

The president's threat, however, is not just against health employees but the entire working class. "Everyone in the country has to be prepared to make more sacrifices," he said, if the country is to be placed in lockdown for a longer period.

Rajapakse did not elaborate on these "sacrifices." Government ministers, however, have begun campaigning for wage cuts in the state and private sectors and the media is running editorials on the need for such measures.

An editorial in yesterday's *Island* declared that "such drastic action [wage cuts] will become inevitable… If the state revenue continues to decrease at the present rate, there will be no funds left for salaries or even life-saving medicines. The people must be told this bitter truth."

The working class must establish its own independent action committees and rally the rural and urban poor to combat COVID-19 and the government and employers' austerity measures on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

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