Sri Lankan government abandons limited COVID-19 pandemic restrictions

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President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's government, which claims that COVID-19 has been brought under control nationally, is rapidly abandoning public health measures to limit the spread of the virus. Medical experts have warned, however, that the government's actions are paving the way for a resurgence of infections.

While Colombo reluctantly imposed a lockdown on August 21 in response the rapid spread of the Delta variant across the island, it quickly lifted this basic measure after six weeks, on October 1.

Some restrictions were kept in place, such as night curfews from 11 p.m. to 4 a.m., limiting the number of attendees at weddings and funerals, and imposing restrictions on dining at restaurants. These measures were removed, however, on Monday, 25 October and inter-district travel restrictions will be lifted on Sunday, 31 October.

Primary education sections at about half of Sri Lanka's schools were reopened on October 21.

Yesterday, President Rajapakse told a meeting of the Committee for COVID-19 Prevention that school principals should be made aware that "the process of reopening schools [had] to be implemented expeditiously."

As in other countries, the Rajapakse government is implementing the murderous "herd immunity" policy and calling on the population to "live with the coronavirus" as the "new normal." As a result, the Delta variant has spread rapidly across the country and taken thousands of lives.

In the last week of August, the number of daily cases rose to 5,000 and the daily death toll climbed to over 200. The government, however, ended the lockdown and began scaling back health safety restrictions as soon as daily cases dropped to 1,000 and the daily death toll to 100.

On Wednesday, Sri Lankan health authorities reported 540 cases and 22 deaths, increasing the overall total of cases in Sri Lanka since the pandemic began to 538,860 and deaths to 13,696.

On Tuesday, Sri Lanka Medical Association chairperson Dr. Padma Gunaratne sent a letter to President Rajapakse warning him about the dangerous situation.

"Lessons learnt from the recent outbreaks in countries such as the UK, Singapore and Israel," she said, "compel Sri Lanka to believe that another wave is imminent, particularly in a situation where the restriction of movement has been lifted,"

Gunaratne warned: "Another wave of infections will be extremely deleterious to the health and the economy of the country."

In order to justify its relaxation of COVID-19 health security measures, Colombo is seeking to artificially engineer lower official statistics of infections and deaths.

In June, about 20,000 PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests were being carried out per day. Daily tests have now been reduced to 5,000. The government has consistently ignored calls from medical experts for systematic PCR testing of 40,000 people per day.

Village officers have also been granted the power to release the bodies of those who die at home without doing a PCR test. In other words, official daily COVID-19 death counts may not include many of those who have died at home.

Yesterday, R.S.D Bandara, Sri Lanka Epidemiology Unit's expert for Anuradhapura district, told the media that about 2,500 cases have been reported in that area since October 1. The Padaviya Konketioyava school, which is in the district, also reported yesterday that four

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students had tested positive with the infection.

At the Ruhuna University of Technology Faculty in the island's south, 30 students were discovered to be infected after 170 were given antigen tests. Dozens of cases have also been identified this week in Badulla, Passara, Minuwangoda and Kuliyapitiya. These reports indicate that the virus is present in many areas across the country and expose the government's fraudulent claims echoed in the media that the pandemic is under control.

Sri Lankan health authorities are attempting to blame the rising number of infections on irresponsible actions by the population. Director General of Health Services Asela Gunawardena told the media on Tuesday that the behaviour of people was "sad."

These statements are utterly hypocritical. The uncontrolled spread of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka is the direct responsibility of the government which has dangerously reopened the country without proper health security measures on public transport, factories, schools, and other busy places.

The government's reopening of schools and other facilities is driven by big business demands that nothing be allowed to hinder profit-making. The ruling class regards school closures and children protected at home as a barrier to getting workers back into workplaces.

The reckless reopening of schools underway internationally is producing disastrous results. In the US alone, over 100,000 students are being infected each week from this policy.

Sri Lankan Family Health Bureau specialist Kapila Jayaratne told the media on October 8 that there had been a total of 59,000 children infected since the pandemic began, with 67 deaths so far including 13 at home.

On October 13, consulting physician Dr. Waruna Gunatilleka said long-COVID infections would generate a "public health crisis" in Sri Lanka and that between 10 and 30 percent of those infected would suffer from long-term debilitating effects from the virus.

A recent report on long-COVID by Dr. Chandima Jeewandara, director of the Department of Cell Biology at the University of Sri Jayawardenepura also revealed that 15 percent of coronavirus patients would suffer mental stress, 1.5 percent muscle pain and 7 percent other symptoms.

The "living with COVID" policies of the Rajapakse government, and its international counterparts, will ensure that this human tragedy continues, resulting in many more deaths. As medical specialists throughout the world have shown what is required is a scientific strategy to eliminate COVID-19.

World-renowned health experts participated in the October 24 webinar organised by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). They told the international audience that the fight to eliminate the pandemic had to involve vaccination of the world's population combined with nationwide lockdowns and strict public healthcare measures.

WSWS editorial board chairperson David North explained in his opening remarks: "The only effective strategy is one based on a globally coordinated campaign aimed at the elimination of the virus on every continent, in every region, and in every country. There is no effective national solution to this pandemic. Humanity—people of all races, ethnicities, and nationalities—must confront and overcome this challenge through a vast collective and truly selfless global effort."

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