

Amid warnings of an Omicron surge, Sri Lankan government maintains criminal “opening up” policy

Pradeep Ramanayake
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Omicron, which is rapidly becoming dominant variant around the world, is threatening a serious disaster in Sri Lanka. However, facing a worsening economic crisis, government is pressing workers back to work, encouraging foreign tourists and re-opening schools despite the obvious dangers.

The government, the media and officials are all seeking to promote a fatalistic attitude that nothing can be done. Last Monday, health ministry viral specialist Nadeeka Janakage, told the media: “We have to accept the fact that Omicron is present and spreading in our country. In the coming weeks, it will surpass the Delta variant and become the dominant variant in Sri Lanka.”

The following day, Association of Medical Specialists president Dr Lakkumar Fernando pointed to the consequences of an “Omicron tsunami,” saying: “Many more will be infected with this variant, which will lead to overcrowding in hospitals, and many health workers will be infected and quarantined, severely crippling the health system.”

The total number of Omicron infections in Sri Lanka is currently over 50 with the 41 cases confirmed on December 31 by the Allergy, Immunology and Cell Biology Unit at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. Institute chief Chandima Jeewandara said that these infections were identified, not by a group of samples from across the island but samples primarily selected from the Katunayake Airport area.

The fact that 23 percent or 41 of the 176 samples used in the test were Omicron positive points to the high prevalence of the variant. A clearer picture of the spread of Omicron could only be obtained if a higher number of samples from across the country were used, but that has not been done.

Hemantha Herath, deputy director of health services, commented to the media last Monday: “Although Omicron infected people have been detected only in few areas yet, it does not mean that they are only present in those areas.”

To bolster its false claim that the pandemic is under control, the government is deliberately under-counting infections by reducing the number of PCR tests to just 6,000 per day. Medical experts have recommended that there should be at least 40,000 tests per day. Even on this limited testing, around 600 infections are being reported daily along with 20 deaths.

The Rajapakse government is entirely responsible for the spread of COVID-19 and now the cases of the new variant that have emerged. Vowing not disrupt profit generation, Colombo is not just refusing to implement any new public health measures to stop the pandemic but is removing previously limited measures.

The government, which did not impose any specific travel restrictions during the Christmas and New Year holiday period, has now lifted limits on weddings, outdoor gatherings and sporting events. All public sector employees were directed to return to work last Monday with special leave for pregnant mothers and mothers with children under one year cancelled. The tourism industry and non-essential businesses, including retail, and schools have been fully reopened.

Despite the Omicron infections in the Katunayake Airport area, the country’s main international airport, there are no restrictions on the flow of foreign tourists into the country. The *Daily Mirror* reported that 11,380 foreign tourists arrived in the first four days of the new year. Sri Lanka does not have a proper quarantine program for foreign visitors.

The government has refused to take any specific measures to stop the new variant spreading, offloading all responsibility onto the population. “Whatever the virus, the symptoms are the same and the health measures [against it] are the same,” Deputy Director of Health Services Hemantha Herath said last week.

“The people must protect themselves... There is no point in going after numbers. What needs to be done is to take steps to prevent the spread,” he declared. His comments deliberately ignore evidence that Omicron is far more infectious than previous strains, is more vaccine-resistant and is a greater danger to young people.

Like its counterparts around the world, the Rajapakse government’s policies are based on protecting the profits of big business not human lives. In order to recover from the deep economic crisis created by the depletion of foreign reserves, Colombo has directed all export industries, including those producing non-essential goods, to remain open, with workers prevented from take any leave unless they have medically-certified COVID infection symptoms.

Instead of allocating more funds to improve the rundown public health care system to meet the challenge posed by the pandemic, the government has provided massive relief packages to boost big business profits.

An article entitled “Finance minister’s 229 billion rupees economic relief package buoys stock market,” in the *Island* on January 5, reported that the Colombo Stock Exchange (CSE) index rose by 174.72 points last Monday and Tuesday to close at an all-time high. The huge package amounted to 10 percent 10 percent of projected 2022 government revenues.

Sri Lankan exports hit monthly peaks in November, following the government’s full approval of companies demanding that workers return to their factories and workplaces despite the danger of being infected with the deadly virus. Garment exports climbed by 58 percent, rubber products by 47 percent, tea by 22 percent and coconut products by 41 percent.

The Rajapakse government and other capitalist governments around the world insist that vaccination is the only solution, ignoring all other necessary health measures to stop the pandemic. The rapid spread of the virus and its Delta and Omicron variant, even in countries where a large percentage of the population

has been vaccinated, has exposed these false claims.

The pandemic cannot be eliminated without a global vaccination program combined with massive efforts to increase the number of tests, proper quarantining of the infected, the closure of non-essential production and schools to maintain social distancing, and the provision of high-quality face masks and personal protective equipment to the general public, including health workers.

None of these measures will be implemented as long as control of the pandemic remains in the hands of the ruling classes. The eradication of the pandemic is inseparably linked to a unified movement of the working class fighting for a socialist program to overthrow the capitalist system and reorganise society according to human need not private profit.

The Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic launched by the *World Socialist Web Site* is crucial in developing that consciousness within the working class.



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