

# Sri Lankan president maintains criminal silence as Omicron cases surge

Saman Gunadasa  
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Rising numbers of Omicron infections are being reported throughout Sri Lanka indicating that the country is on the edge of a massive surge of the highly-infectious coronavirus variant. Hospital authorities are reporting increased hospitalisations and greater demand for intensive care beds and oxygen.

On Tuesday, Health Promotion Bureau Director Dr. Ranjith Batuwanthudawa told a privately-owned television network that over 95 percent of COVID-19 samples sequenced at two research institutions were Omicron.

The new outbreak in Sri Lanka is occurring alongside a massive global surge of Omicron with the US, EU, Australia and India recording some of the highest rates.

While Sri Lanka's daily infection rate was over 480 in the first week of January, it climbed to almost 900 in the fourth week. The island's total number of COVID-19 deaths is currently over 15,330 and more than 603,650 infections.

Sri Lanka's official COVID-19 figures, however, have been understated and inaccurate. Since the beginning of the pandemic President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's government has deliberately kept PCR testing low in an attempt to claim the situation was under control.

Despite rising Omicron infections and repeated warnings about the new variant by health experts, PCR testing remains at a daily average of just 7,443 tests over the past two weeks.

- COVID-19 health ministry coordinator Dr. Anwar Hamdani has revealed that 40 percent of total bed capacity at government hospitals—approximately 5,400—is occupied by the COVID-19 patients.

- Dr. Hasitha Ekanayake, director of the Infectious Disease Hospital, the country's premier infectious disease treatment facility, revealed on Tuesday that coronavirus case admissions had increased by 50 percent in the past week. He also said that COVID-19 PCR testing positivity

was 50 to 60 percent and that there would be a major outbreak throughout Sri Lanka in next two weeks.

- Colombo's National Hospital has reported a major rise in oxygen use in dedicated coronavirus treatment wards. The hospital director also said there had been reduced "priority for routine surgery" because of increased numbers of COVID-19 patients.

- Deputy director of health services, Dr. G. Wijesuriya, has reported rising numbers of coronavirus-infected children, with 40 being treated at Lady Ridgeway, Sri Lanka's main children's hospital.

- Schools, which were fully reopened this year, are likely to be hot beds of Omicron infection. This follows last October's betrayal of a teachers' wage struggle by the education unions and their agreement to allow the systematic reopening of all schools.

Parts of some schools in cities like Kandy, Panadura and Kalutara have been closed because of coronavirus infections. The teachers training college at Meerigama reopened in the second week of January and after that 50 infections were reported at the facility.

According to state health and education authorities, if infected students and teachers are identified, only those individuals and a few close associates, are required to quarantine.

- Increasing numbers of infections are occurring in factories, particularly at the garment plants in the free trade zones and elsewhere. An infected worker from the Smart Shirt plant in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone told the *World Socialist Web Site* last week that many workers in the zone, including at her factory, have been infected.

- While hundreds of hospital employees are being infected, they are being directed to keep working if their "symptoms are mild." Last week, 62 nurses, including three pregnant nurses, were infected at the National Hospital in Colombo.

Despite the surging number of coronavirus cases,

President Rajapakse is maintaining a criminal silence, indicating that his government will do nothing to prevent the spread of the highly contagious Omicron variant.

Delivering his policy statement to the parliament last week, he declared: “We have been able to resume normal community life having vaccinated more than 85 percent of the targeted population and brought the disease situation under control...”

Rajapakse blamed the brief and highly limited lockdowns reluctantly imposed by his government in the last two years as the main source of all the country’s economic ills, and indicated that such measures would be avoided.

In line with the profit-driven herd immunity policies being pursued by the major capitalist powers, Health Minister Keheliya Rambukwella told the media on Monday that no preparations were being made for lockdowns because they would severely affect the economy.

Rambukwella said that the government plans to make three vaccine doses mandatory for people visiting public places. This is to promote the illusion that vaccinations alone can prevent the spread of the pandemic. Health ministry officials are also placing the onus on individuals, urging the public to “act responsibly,” wear masks and maintain social distancing.

The government continues to downplay the dangers, repeating the reactionary claim that people should “live with virus” in the so-called new normal situation. Sri Lankan workers are being forced to keep working in unsafe, dangerously-congested factories, plants and offices and use jam-packed public transport.

While factories continue operating “as usual,” with minimal or no health guidelines, overstretched government hospitals are avoiding conducting tests on patients with COVID-19 symptoms, preferring to send them home with some prescriptions and medicine.

Last weekend, the *Sunday Times* revealed that “home-based treatment” was “thriving” in Sri Lanka. The newspaper reported that there are about 130,000 patients being treated at home, claiming only 1.5 percent of infections needed hospitalisation.

So-called home-based treatment is being promoted because the government refuses to spend the billions of rupees required to upgrade the public health system which has systematically run down by successive governments. This includes the Rajapakse regime, which has reduced health funding since the pandemic began.

Workers must reject the Rajapakse regime’s reactionary

policy of sacrificing the masses to the pandemic and oppose all attempts to normalise mass infections and the resultant deaths. As medical science has revealed, those who “recover” from the disease face the danger of the debilitating effects of Long COVID.

The emergence of Omicron in Sri Lanka has exploded Rajapakse’s claim that his regime brought the pandemic under control and created the conditions for the resumption of “normal community life.”

Not surprisingly, the parliamentary opposition parties and the trade unions have not uttered a word about the Omicron outbreak and the government’s ongoing “live with the virus” mantra.

Workers must demand comprehensive public health measures to protect lives, including mass testing, tracing, isolating, the lockdown of unnecessary production, closure of schools, immediate funding measures to expand and develop public health infrastructure and a globally-coordinated scientific program to eliminate the pandemic.

This requires the independent mobilisation of the working class against the profit system and the building of action committees at every workplace, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

Workers and young people should also support for the Global Workers’ Inquest launched by the WSWS to expose the criminal handling of the pandemic by the capitalist governments around the world and to arm the working class with the necessary scientific knowledge to fight for the elimination of the virus.



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