

COVID-19 death of a student reported in Sri Lanka

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An 11-year-old student of the Naththandiya Dhammissara national school in Sri Lanka died while receiving treatment in an Intensive Care Unit of a local hospital on Monday for a COVID-19 infection. This school is situated at Naththandiya in north-western province, 60 kilometres from Colombo.

The girl, B.M.T. Maneesha Kumari Fernando, attended the school on January 28. The next day, after returning from a private dancing class, she had respiratory difficulties. When taken to a state hospital in the area, she tested positive for coronavirus and three days later succumbed to her illness.

This tragic death demonstrates the criminality of the reopening of Sri Lankan schools amid the continuing spread of COVID-19.

The health and education authorities took no action following the girl's death. The school, which has more than 5,000 students and about 200 teachers, was not closed, nor were teachers and students tested.

A teacher at the school told the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) that staff and students were shocked by the tragedy. Attendance at schools in the area has dropped.

Another teacher in the area said that in recent weeks many students were found suffering from fever and a running nose but it is not known if they are infected because no tests are done. The village hospital used to have around 30 patients daily about a month ago but the number has gone up to more than 100, including children. All have COVID-19 symptoms.

The government reopened the schools last October. Now school children in every part of the country are becoming victims. The advice of education and health authorities is that if a student gets infected, he or she and close contacts should be asked to stay home. If the contacts exhibit no symptoms in three days they are allowed to return. Teachers are told the same advice.

When asked about the rapid spread of COVID-19,

Health Services Deputy Director General, Dr. Hemantha Herath, dismissively told the media: "The number of Covid-19-infected children in the LRH [Lady Ridgeway Hospital for Children in Colombo] had increased, but it has not become a serious situation."

He added: "It is a known fact that the prevalence of COVID-19 among children is increasing when schools are reopened... [But] closing schools for a longer time is an injustice to children."

Herath said the "responsibility" lies with parents and teachers to follow the health guidelines and prevent infections. The real responsibility for infections and deaths, including of school students, lies with the government which has all but abandoned necessary public health restrictions and has set guidelines that are patently inadequate.

Testing is breaking down. Ravi Kumudesh, convener of the Federation of Health Professionals, told the *Island* on January 28 that many hospitals, including the Colombo National Hospital, the Kandy and Ratnapura Teaching Hospitals, and those in Ampara, Karapitiya, Peradeniya, Batticaloa and Trincomalee, have been forced to stop rapid antigen tests due to the shortage of kits.

Moreover, the claim that schools were reopened to do "justice to children" is false. The reopening of schools was part of the government's policy of "living with virus" and was aimed at driving parents back into workplaces for the benefit of businesses.

Director of Maternal and Child Health, Dr. Chithramalee de Silva, reported last December that 69 pregnant mothers and 89 children under 18 had died since COVID-19 first emerged in the country. These are just the official, greatly understated numbers.

With the emergence of the Omicron strain, infections and deaths have been climbing. Daily admissions to the Lady Ridgeway Hospital for Children in Colombo have risen to 20-25. Hundreds of students and teachers are

being infected throughout the country.

The Sri Lanka government is following the same criminal policy as its counterparts around the world in the face of huge surges of infections due to Omicron. Teachers and students have come into struggle to oppose the forcible reopening of schools in New York, Chicago, London and Paris.

Throughout Sri Lanka, the daily number of infections crossed the 1,000 mark on Sunday for the first time in months, recording 1,056. On Monday the figure jumped again to 1,137. Similarly, the daily death toll is also sharply rising, with 20 deaths reported on Sunday and 32 on Monday. The total number of infections in Sri Lanka is now 611,185 and the death toll is 15,473.

Many workplaces are reporting infections. On January 2, the state printing department had to be closed down because 15 employees in three divisions contracted the virus. A state transport ministry official reported that a major section had to be closed due to infections. On Sunday, 15 employees of the southern expressway were reported to be infected. Fourteen trains were cancelled on Monday after guards had been infected.

Despite the rapid spread of infections, the government is maintaining its “live with the virus” policy that is leading to infections and deaths. Yesterday the Director General of Health Service (DGHS), Asela Gunawardena, maintained last month’s limited public health guidelines that limit the size of weddings and other functions to 50 percent of the venue’s capacity and require DGHS approval for public gatherings. All employees, even pregnant women, can be recalled for work, however.

Far from opposing the government’s policies, the unions have been instrumental in carrying them out and share the responsibility for the results. The teacher unions backed the government’s reopening of schools last October and in the process betrayed a 100-day struggle by educators that included demands for proper health protection measures.



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