

One day queuing for cooking gas in Embilipitiya, Sri Lanka

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I recently visited my sister and her family in Embilipitiya, situated 190 kilometres from Colombo, during a holiday in Sri Lanka. The rural town is totally different to what I witnessed three years ago in 2019. The economic, social and political crisis engulfing Sri Lanka, as a part of the global crisis of capitalism, has devastated the area.

Millions of people have been forced into grinding poverty because of the big business policies of the Rajapakse government, now ousted by a mass uprising, and its predecessors over the last seven decades.

The severe scarcity of fertilisers and fuel has drastically disrupted the cultivation of banana, papaya, guava and other crops grown around Embilipitiya. Consequently, the vibrant market of small farmers and vendors in the town is all but empty.

The bustling town, which previously operated 24 hours a day, is a ghost town by around 5pm, especially after the evening power cuts. Dozens of lorries that used to queue up and be loaded to transport crops to other cities are nowhere to be seen. Hundreds of small businesses that depended on agriculture have been wiped out.

Even those farmers who managed to have a small harvest using limited amounts of fertilisers and traditional methods, struggle to bring their crops to the market and transport them to other parts of the country because of the severe fuel shortages. Across the island people have to wait in lines for days, in some cases over 10 days, to get a rationed amount of fuel.

While I was there, my sister's family received a phone call early in the morning telling her that the "yellow gas" (yellow coloured cooking gas cylinders distributed by Laugfs gas company) had arrived in town, and that the Police Station was distributing it. The previous Laugfs gas delivery happened last year.

We quickly rushed there with our empty cylinder. By the time we arrived at 8am there were already about 300 people ahead of us. I saw the desperation of those in line because gas was the only alternative to cooking with firewood, a time consuming and laborious experience.

Many families have already been forced to use firewood because of the severe gas shortages. I saw that numbers of health workers, including nurses, had joined the queue in their uniforms. Many people had also travelled long distances from surrounding areas.

With utter contempt for those in line, the police and their accomplices were serving themselves from the back of the gas lorry while shouting and threatening villagers in the queue.

We managed to buy a gas cylinder at about 2.30 pm. The price of a 12.5 kg gas cylinder was 6,895 rupees (\$US19), up from 1,800 rupees (\$US5), four times higher than six months ago.

While the government claims that large-scale distribution of gas is occurring across the country, there are still acute shortages of gas distributed by the state-run Litro Gas (Blue Gas) company.

My sister phoned me last Monday, explaining that there had been a delivery of blue gas in Embilipitiya that day, after waiting a couple of months. Once again, they had to wait in a line of over 400 people—from early morning until the afternoon, to buy a cylinder. Its price has almost doubled over the past three months, from 2,700 rupees to 5,025 rupees for a 12.5 kg cylinder.

In order to purchase gas, people have to show their May 2022 electricity bill. A housewife from the southern part of the island told me that she had been in the queue overnight. People who were unable to get gas at that time were given a number so that they would be at the front of the line when the next delivery arrives.

For young families, and particularly those who do not have an empty gas cylinder to swap during the gas purchase, life has become even more difficult. There is no way to buy the empty cylinders, apart from paying over 21,000 rupees on the black market.

While I was in the long line for yellow gas at Embilipitiya I spoke with several people about the deepening economic crisis which has forced them into poverty, social degradation and destitution.

Lakmal works for an insurance company, but instead of going to work that day he had to join the gas queue.

“At the end of the month we’re normally busy collecting insurance premiums but because I cannot go to work today, this will impact on my salary next month.

“The Rajapakse government is especially responsible for the crisis we confront. Their predecessors are also culpable. I don’t think that there will be solutions to these problems even within the next four to five years,” he said.

Lakmal agreed that the criminal responses of the Sri Lankan government, and its counterparts across the world, to the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine had exacerbated the problems in Sri Lanka.

“Sri Lanka was previously able to import fuel directly from Russia but as a country that is highly indebted and influenced by America, it is frightened of doing that anymore, thinking that it would go against American interests. Even our children will have to suffer as a result of the servitude to these countries by our rulers.”

“Changing these politicians with another set will not resolve anything. That is what many people are discussing now,” he added.

Jayantha works for a computer training centre. “I have a class in the morning,” he said, “but I had to join the gas queue and cancel my work there today. A few years ago, we had the possibility of buying what we wanted, but that’s not the case anymore.”

Referring to the huge increases in the cost of cooking gas, he said: “But our income has not gone up. The government is responsible for this inflation hike. Their wrong policies led to this but we, the toiling people, have done our jobs as we used to do.”

Jayantha said that the US-led war against Russia has destabilised Sri Lanka and other countries across the world.

“These things happening at the international level have had an impact on our country. America is fighting for its domination and trying to be the supreme nuclear power. Countries like Sri Lanka are manufacturing lots of things, including garments and agricultural goods, but we don’t produce oil and they do not get a proper price because of the influence of the major countries.”

Bandula, a professional photographer, explained the problems he now confronts. “Because of the fuel shortages it’s difficult to get to customers. The cost of all the equipment and resources we use has gone up but there is a marked decline in the work we receive.

I previously did around five to six wedding shoots over a six-month period but since the beginning of this year, I’ve only managed to do three. Our income has dropped

significantly.”

Bandula referred to the closure of government schools, which were only operating three days a week and then completely shut down in the middle of the second term because of fuel shortages. “I have two children,” he said, “but for their [private] tuition, I have to spend 1,000 to 1,500 rupees for just two hours.”

Nilanthi is a care worker and a mother of six children. She is not currently employed because the paltry pay she received was not enough to survive on.

“I had to go to six neighbours this morning to borrow 3,000 rupees to buy gas. I promised that I would return the money. I’m here, but all I’ve had this morning is a cup of tea.

“Many people like me live a hand-to-mouth existence doing any casual job to survive. We’ve been forced into misery and hopelessness. We were in queues to vote for these people but now we’re being punished by the very people we elected,” she said.

“We didn’t expect this kind of country and governance but were looking ahead to a good future for our children. That dream has now been destroyed for several generations. We didn’t vote to enrich one dynasty.

“I currently survive with the help of my neighbours and relatives. If I receive a kilogram of rice, I cook it for several days. Most days we survive on a little bit of porridge made of rice and salt and sometimes I receive some jackfruit and a portion of a coconut.”

In Sri Lanka some low-income families receive Samurdiya, rudimentary government welfare involving small supplies of food, including rice. Nilanthi, however, does not even receive this inadequate support.

“I have been trying to get Samurdiya by going to all the government places over the last few years. These efforts have been to no avail, she said.

“Those who have money enjoy their wealth and lives. But why can’t they do anything for the people who are in desperation? Why do these rich people loot all this money from the poor?” she asked.



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