

# UNICEF warns of worsening child malnutrition in Sri Lanka

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Last week Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe pompously declared that “No citizen should be allowed to starve, no child should be malnourished.” Media reportage claimed that the president was establishing an “accelerated national multi-sector combined programme to ensure food security and protect children from malnutrition.”

Wickremesinghe’s cynical proclamation followed a series of public warnings by international and local agencies about the growing numbers of starving families and cases of severe malnutrition among children in Sri Lanka.

The horrendous social conditions facing the masses are a direct result of the brutal measures imposed by the government of former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and the current Wickremesinghe regime to make working people pay for Sri Lanka’s unprecedented economic crisis.

On September 12, the Food and Agriculture Organisation and World Food Program reported that Sri Lankan children are acutely vulnerable to the worsening social crisis. It noted that an estimated 6.3 million people faced “moderate to severe acute food insecurity,” and that their situation would worsen if no adequate “life-saving assistance” and livelihood support was provided.

The report warned that this would further deteriorate from October 2022 to February 2023 due to poor harvests of staple foods, such as paddy rice, and the ongoing economic crisis.

“Months into this crippling economic crisis, families are running out of options—they are exhausted. More than 60 percent of families are eating less, and eating cheaper, less nutritious food,” it stated.

But rather than provide real assistance, cash-strapped Sri Lankan governments have scaled back on nutrition programs, such as school meals and fortified food to mothers and undernourished children.

\* On August 26, UNICEF South Asia Regional Director George Laryea-Adjei told a media briefing in Colombo that increasing living costs and food prices have forced many families to drastically cut their daily diet. In September 2021, inflation was 5.6 percent on a year-on-year basis. Last

month it climbed to 64.3 percent, with food inflation at 93.7 percent.

According to a recent UNICEF report, 5.7 million people, including 2.3 million children, are in dire need of food support. It also revealed that 15.7 percent of children under 5 are suffering from malnutrition. Adjei warned that children could “face severe stunting and death” because their families are starving, and that malnutrition in Sri Lanka was now the second worst in South Asia and the tenth worst in the world.

According to Sri Lanka’s Department of Census and Statistics, over 10,000 children are currently in institutions, mainly because of family poverty. The UNICEF report warned that “their conditions will be compromised as the crisis worsens and as additional families place their children in institutional care since they cannot afford to feed or educate them.”

UNICEF noted that “negative coping mechanisms,” such as the “institutionalisation of children, school absenteeism/drop-out, limited food intake,” had been “aggravated by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, and current socio-economic and political crisis.”

The agency also warned that high inflation will double the number of people living in poverty over the next 24 months. Some 93 percent of those below the poverty line are in the rural and estate sectors.

\* A June survey by Save the Children reported deteriorating psychological health of children in 30 percent of Sri Lankan families. The major reason for this was the collapse in family incomes, which had led to changes in children’s appetites and sleeping patterns and signs of increasing aggression, with an inability to control their feelings and being violent to others.

\* A recent survey by the Lady Ridgeway Children’s Hospital also revealed that most of the children admitted to the facility over the past two months were suffering from ordinary or chronic malnutrition and stunted growth.

Addressing a media briefing, Deepal Perera, a specialist at the hospital, said, “If children are not saved from

malnutrition, there is a danger that their intelligence quotient will decline due to lack of brain growth.”

These alarming reports constitute a damning indictment of the capitalist system and its global crisis, which is intensifying as a result of the COVID pandemic and the ongoing US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

Fearful of a resumption of the mass protests and strikes that brought down the Rajapakse regime, Wickremesinghe’s declaration that “no citizen should be starved and no child malnourished” is a crude attempt to cover up this reality, even as his government prepares to unleash new IMF austerity measures.

In a parliamentary debate on the UNICEF findings on September 6, Plantation Minister Romesh Pathirana desperately attempted to refute its findings, falsely claiming it was based on a 2016 report.

*World Socialist Web Site* reporters discussed his assertions with estate workers and people in rural areas, who are among the most impoverished sections of the Sri Lankan working class. They pointed out that increasing prices, job losses and stagnant wages were causing malnutrition.

Kamalani Balachandran, from the Malwatte section of the Aislaby Estate in Bandarawela, said: “We could previously buy fish on salary days but this is now impossible.” They were also unable to purchase milk powder and eggs because they were too expensive. “We don’t have a proper meal for breakfast or lunch but just have a biscuit and tea. For dinner we have rice with something, and this situation does not lead to malnutrition?”

Radhika Kumari, a young computer operator at a private company but living in the same estate, said: “We cannot even purchase half the amount of goods we used to buy.” She explained that only plain tea could be given to children because of the high price of milk powder. “Estate workers can only afford to buy 50 or 100 grams of any item and only purchase a quarter of a Lifebuoy soap tablet. People don’t have money for food,” she added.

A housewife from Ahangama in southern Sri Lanka told the WSWs that she earned some income by making coir ropes at home for Hayley’s, the multinational company. Her husband, a building worker, is unable to get regular daily work and she has been unable to work recently due to illness.

“If I’m able to make 15 ropes I can earn 500 rupees [\$US1.40]. We don’t get any assistance from the government, or any other authority, so we can’t buy nutritional food for our children. Sending them to school is also extremely difficult,” she said.

Nimalsiri, a 58-year-old fisherman from the same village, has five children. He said that his son-in-law sometimes gets work as a day labourer but is only paid about 1,500 rupees.

“I can’t go fishing on a daily basis because of the fuel crisis,” he said, “and if I do go fishing, I only earn 1,000 rupees. How can we feed children with this pittance? We all are starving, including children,” he said, explaining that his electricity bill recently increased from 200 to 1,200 rupees.

What is the reason for rising child malnutrition in Sri Lanka? The reports point to hyperinflation, stagnant wages, food insecurity and poverty, but these are only the symptoms. The real root of this social catastrophe is the profit system, not just in Sri Lanka but across the globe.

According to a United Nations report, the number of people suffering from hunger globally rose to 828 million in 2021, a 150 million increase after the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. It estimated that about 45 million children under five years old are currently suffering from malnutrition, with a 12-fold rise in those facing death.

At the same time the world’s richest have accumulated vast amounts of wealth. According to the UN World Food Program, just \$US6.6 billion of this wealth could be used to avert global hunger.

This social catastrophe cannot be addressed while production and distribution remain in the hands of the capitalist class. What is required is for the working class to put an end to the profit system and to replace it with socialism, where production is under the democratic control of the working class and determined according to the needs of the majority, not the wealthy few.

That is why the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is calling for the banks, the big companies and the plantations to be placed under public ownership and the democratic control of workers. Such a socialist policy, based on an internationalist perspective, can only be implemented by establishing a workers’ and peasants’ government.

The SEP is calling for the building of action committees of workers and the rural poor and for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and the Rural Masses comprised of the delegates from these committees to fight for this program.



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