

COVID infections rise in Sri Lanka, despite government's efforts to hide the crisis

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On April 20, a 76-year-old man from Neerveli village, in northern Sri Lanka's Jaffna district, died after he was found to be infected with COVID-19 at the Jaffna Teaching Hospital.

According to media reports, another person being treated for a fever at the Pointpedro Base Hospital, 30 kilometres north of Jaffna, was transferred to Jaffna Teaching Hospital where they tested positive for the coronavirus. Hospital administration said both patients had been placed on ventilators.

Four days earlier, on April 16, Jaffna Teaching Hospital assistant director, Dr. Jamunananda held a media conference and warned that the coronavirus was spreading in the district. "Up to date, five people have been diagnosed with the coronavirus. In order to prevent this infection from spreading in the community, we need to wear face masks, maintain social distance, and avoid crowded places," he said.

When Jaffna hospital management reported this information to the Ministry of Health in Colombo and began taking precautionary action, government officials intervened, opposing the imposition of new COVID-19 safety measures.

Ministry of Health officials discussed the situation with the director of the Northern Province Health Services and Jaffna Teaching Hospital management. They instructed the Northern Health authorities not to conduct coronavirus tests, or to publicly release the information without their permission.

When *World Socialist Web Site* reporters contacted Dr. Jamunananda about the rising infections and the discussions with government health officials he said: "I cannot provide any information related to coronavirus. It is not allowed."

According to COVID-19 reports from the Ministry of Health's Epidemiological Unit, three people died from

COVID-19 and 32 people tested positive in Sri Lanka last week (April 17–24). No information was given on which district or hospital reported this data. The latest coronavirus deaths and the emergence of severe cases in Jaffna district refute governments claims that COVID-19 is just like a normal dose of the flu.

Sri Lanka's official coronavirus death toll has now exceeded 16,800, but this figure is likely to be a serious underestimation because testing and tracing have been severely limited for a long period.

The Wickremasinghe government, in line with its counterparts around the world, has implemented "let it rip" policies, downplaying the pandemic and falsely claiming it is possible to "live with the virus." Like his predecessor Gotabhaya Rajapakse, President Wickremesinghe is maintaining the criminal policy of placing corporate profits over human lives.

When the coronavirus emerged in early 2020, the Rajapakse government disregarded its impact on Sri Lanka, claiming that the country, on its own, could manage the situation.

Amid rising infections and workers' demands for proper anti-COVID protection measures, the government was compelled to lock down the country in late March 2020. It began to reopen the economy, however, after a month, following demands from big business and international finance capital.

The government ignored new surges of coronavirus infections, rejecting calls by independent health experts for appropriate health measures to be implemented. As a result, the Delta variant of COVID-19 in August 2021 began taking thousands of lives and overwhelming the dilapidated health service, forcing the government to introduce a highly limited six-week lockdown.

Beginning in late 2021, all COVID safety restrictions have been abandoned by successive governments with

most people, including doctors and nurses in hospitals, no longer wearing masks.

People with fevers, coughs and colds move around without masks and if they visit hospital, they are not tested for COVID-19 but are only treated for common ailments.

When old people die at home, this is seen as a normal death even if the medical cause of death is not determined.

Students no longer wear masks at school or to and from the facility, increasing the risk of infecting their parents with the deadly virus.

Religious festivals and ceremonies, like weddings and funerals, are held without masks and other health and safety precautions. Markets and transport are also operating without anti-COVID procedures while health authorities are not conducting any health awareness programs and activities to educate and protect the public.

Faced with this situation, the Sri Lankan ruling elite and its governments have failed to take any significant steps to upgrade public healthcare. In fact, public health has further deteriorated, having been subjected to consecutive budget cuts. This year's budget allocation to the health sector is just 322 billion rupees (approximately \$US1 billion) compared to 539 billion rupees allocated to defence and the police.

Sri Lanka's ongoing foreign debt crisis and Wickremesinghe's brutal IMF-dictated austerity measures are leading to a catastrophic crisis in the public health system.

In February, the Sri Lankan Medical Association (SLMA), the peak body for all medical practitioners, warned that the country's health sector is heading towards a "total breakdown." SLMA president Dr Vinya Ariyaratne told the media that Sri Lanka's health sector faced a severe crisis "due to the shortage of medicines, surgical equipment and chemicals used in labs."

Sri Lanka's working masses now face an even graver threat with the emergence of new, even more contagious, COVID-19 variants. The rapidly proliferating lineage of the Omicron virus labeled XBB.1.16, which is far more infectious and immune evading than other Omicron subvariants, is now sweeping through neighboring India and another 33 countries. While India's far-right Modi government

claims it has "successfully controlled" the pandemic, the official daily count of new coronavirus cases exceeded 10,000 the last week.



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