

Amid signs of a COVID surge, Sri Lankan government blocks testing and preventive measures

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In the last week of December, three COVID-19 deaths were reported in Sri Lanka, raising serious concerns of a renewed surge in COVID-19 pandemic.

- On December 24, a 65-year-old man died of pneumonia in Kandy Hospital.
- On December 25, a 63-year-old woman died after being admitted to Gampaha General Hospital due to vomiting and respiratory problems.
- On December 29, a 54-year-old mother of three died after being admitted to Anuradhapura General Hospital due to respiratory problems.

All three were confirmed as COVID-infected through tests only after their death. However, it has not yet been confirmed with which COVID variant they had been infected. On January 4, one more death from the COVID-19 was reported.

The deaths have been reported under circumstances in which the Omicron subvariant, known as JN.1, has rapidly spread throughout more than 40 countries, including the US, in Europe, and in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu that neighbours Sri Lanka. Moreover, the previous strong variant known as BA.2.86 (nicknamed “Pirola”) has not yet gone away.

The reporting of three COVID deaths in a week underscores the danger that many more people are infected across the island under conditions where testing and preventative measures have been all but abandoned.

The government of President Ranil Wickremesinghe and health authorities, however, have refused to increase testing or to take other emergency health care measures such as contact tracing and quarantining to stop the spread of the deadly virus.

Instead, at a press conference held on December 2,

Health Minister Ramesh Pathirana said that the people should get used to the health practices followed during the previous COVID period. The government is cynically washing its hands of its responsibility to protect the public from the pandemic and blaming the public instead.

Around the world, capitalist governments have placed corporate profits above human lives. The previous Sri Lankan government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse in 2021 repeated the lie that the “pandemic is over” and its impact has diminished, even as the Omicron variant continued to spread. The Wickremesinghe government is now following the same murderous policy.

Health ministry spokesperson, Dr G. Wijesuriya, justified the government’s non-implementation COVID testing and other preventative health measures, telling the media on December 29 that “the deaths have nothing to do with the COVID-19 virus.” A day later, he changed his tune, saying: “The public should not have any unnecessary fear of an outbreak of COVID-19.”

In the face of demands from health workers to increase COVID testing, health authorities fraudulently claimed that “sample tests” were conducted by the health ministry and their results were “good”.

The Federation of Health Professionals (FHP) has warned the Health Secretary that “many unnecessary problems may arise by not testing for COVID.” It also asked what tests the ministry is conducting and what are the results.

According to the FHP, even when antibody test kits (antigen tests) are available in hospitals, COVID tests are not being done. Hospitals do not have a system to test health workers with COVID symptoms or

suspected COVID patients.

The FHP posed other questions to the Health Secretary including: it is normal to do necessary medical tests in connection with any disease, but why is it not done in connection with COVID; and why are unknown “samples” being tested, even though there are many suspected COVID patients in hospitals?

The media reported on January 4 that rather than increasing testing, the PCR unit conducting COVID tests at the Colombo General Hospital has been completely closed.

Dr. Chandima Jeewandara, director of the Allergy, Immunology and Cell Biology Unit of the University of Sri Jayawardenapura, told the media on December 31 that the new COVID variants may badly affect the elderly and people with chronic diseases and these people needed to get a booster vaccine and wear masks. He also said that he believed that the new subvariant JN.1 may have already come to Sri Lanka.

The Wickremesinghe government and health authorities are creating the conditions for the rapid spread of the deadly COVID virus and its new variants throughout the country without any hindrance.

The criminal disregard of the capitalist ruling class for public health is underlined by the fact that most of the seven million Pfizer vaccines imported into Sri Lanka in 2021/2022 have been allowed to expire. According to former health minister Keheliya *Rambukwella*, only 13 percent of the imported Pfizer vaccines have been used. The government simply failed to develop a coherent plan to provide vaccinations, especially boosters, in areas outside of Colombo.

The public health care system, which is already suffering from shortages of essential personnel, equipment and drugs, cannot cope with a resurgence of the COVID pandemic. Epidemics of dengue, malaria, encephalitis, leptospirosis and measles in Sri Lanka have already exposed serious public health deficiencies. Most COVID testing, vaccination and treatment are confined to expensive private hospitals which ordinary working people cannot afford.

Sri Lankan governments are not exceptional. Around the world, COVID testing and prevention have all but halted as the deadly virus has been allowed rip through the world’s population. The official global death toll stands at seven million, but many more will have died

from the disease as governments insist people “live with COVID.” In Sri Lanka, more than 16,000 have died.

Independent medical scientists are warning that the danger of the pandemic continues with evolution of deadly new strains. Many millions who have been infected suffer from the impact of Long COVID that can seriously harm vital organs and lead to heart attacks and strokes as well as kidney and neurological diseases.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has repeatedly warned that humanity faces enormous danger unless a global strategy to eradicate the COVID-19 pandemic is urgently implemented. In part 2 of its extensive New Year statement “The working class, the fight against capitalist barbarism, and the building of the World Party of Socialist Revolution,” the WSWS urged workers and youth to take up the fight for socialism as the only means for eliminating the scourge of COVID.

“After four years of the pandemic, it is abundantly clear that such a global strategy will never arise under world capitalism, which subordinates all public health spending to the insatiable profit interests of a money-mad financial oligarchy. The very idea that an illness should be eliminated or eradicated, a central concept in public health, has been abandoned. Only through world socialist revolution will it be possible to end the pandemic, as well as stop the further descent into capitalist barbarism and World War III.”



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