

Sudden death of Sri Lankan student at Kelaniya University exposes harsh conditions facing undergraduates

Kapila Fernando
1 April 2024

Niroshana Lakmal, a fourth-year geography student at Kelaniya University in Sri Lanka, died suddenly, late on March 24, after being admitted to hospital.

Lakmal, who boarded at the university's Kannangara Hostel, began having fits at about 10 p.m. that day. According to students, his friends informed hostel wardens that he needed to be hospitalised. The hostel is located about three kilometres from the campus.

Unable to get an ambulance, Lakmal's friends eventually secured a three-wheeler taxi, which was difficult at that time of the night, and transported him to hospital. He died tragically on arrival. Doctors from the Colombo North Teaching Hospital in Ragama have said that his life could have been saved if he had been hospitalised even minutes earlier.

Hundreds of students protested outside the university's administration the next day, accusing hostel wardens of not responding to their telephone calls. If there had been an ambulance at the university, they said, Lakmal's life could have been saved.

Attempting to dissipate students' anger, Kelaniya University Vice Chancellor Nilanthi de Silva has promised to appoint a three-member commission to investigate. While Lakmal's body has been sent to Colombo North Teaching Hospital for postmortem, no report has been issued at the time of writing.

Hundreds of university students travelled to Bogahapalassa, the remote village where Lakmal came from, for his funeral.

Bogahapalassa is near Badalkumbura, about 250 kilometres from Colombo. Many local villagers are employed on small rubber plantations or grow food crops to make a living. Lakmal was the youngest son of a farming family.

Bogahapalassa Junior School Principal H.M. Thilakaratne told the WSWS: "Lakmal attended this school up to Ordinary Level and showed a keen interest in his studies.

His brother was unable to continue his studies here because of the family's economic problems. His father had high hopes in Lakmal."

After completing their Ordinary Level education at Bogahapalassa Junior School, students must travel to a school in Badalkumbura, nine kilometres away. There are no buses, however, and so they crowd into three-wheel taxis. Currently there are only 75 students attending this school, which has no teachers for key subjects. Teachers are also forced to use three-wheeler taxis to get to the school, costing them about 10,000 rupees (\$US33) a month.

A teacher told the WSWS about the difficult conditions facing local villagers. Some people work in the rubber estates, he said, but are only paid three rupees for latex collected from each tree. It is impossible for a worker to earn 2,000 rupees in a day because they cannot do enough trees and cannot work when it is raining.

Kelaniya University campus is located on six acres, about 10 kilometres from Colombo, and has about 10,000 students. It does not have an ambulance, a proper medical centre or other necessary facilities and welfare because of ongoing attacks on education spending.

Kelaniya University students told the WSWS that high living costs and deteriorating conditions in university hostels had seriously affected their education and their health.

A female student from Social Science Department described the situation in Arts Faculty hostels.

"Authorities have crammed six students into rooms that only meant for four. There is no storage space, and we have to keep our books and clothes on the beds. Even though it is very warm these days there are no fans," she said.

"Last year four students were infected with measles and the only reason it didn't spread was because students were removed from the hostel. Many students are infected every year with Dengue fever and when the COVID 19 pandemic was spreading in the campus many students were infected because of these overcrowded conditions," she added.

Students in the hostels have to prepare their own meals, she said, because the food available in the canteens was inedible and buying food from outside was too expensive.

“We cannot eat the morning rice from the canteen. Every day the curries are coconut sambal, dahl and dry fish, and lunch is not much different. These meals cost between 80 and 150 rupees. If you want to eat any fish then you must pay 150 rupees, which means that most of us don’t consume fish or meat. These meals, however, are not sufficient.”

“We do not have an ambulance on campus. Untimely deaths can happen because we don’t have nutritious food or proper medical facilities,” she added.

Kavinda, a third-year Arts Faculty student, explained that Lakmal was from an impoverished family but emphasised that this situation faced many university students.

“At the weekend, I go to work as an assistant to a mason and so my daily income there is 3,000 rupees. I recently went to work at a tea factory in Biyagama where the daily income is 1,200 rupees, but some days you have to return home because there is no work,” he said.

“My younger sister and brother are still at school so my parents cannot afford to pay my expenses. I don’t have hostel accommodation and am paying 7,000 rupees a month in a boarding house,” the student said.

A university lecturer told the WSWS that the number of students attending her lectures had severely declined. “I know that most university students are doing part time work, which means they are unable to study or learn with peace of mind,” she said.

Sri Lanka has 17 government universities with more than 100,000 enrolled internal students and almost 300,000 external enrolments. Conditions for these students has dramatically deteriorated in line with drastic cuts in education expenditure by successive Sri Lankan governments.

Addressing the media at the protest after the student’s death, Kelaniya Students Union president Siri Sumana, who is a Buddhist monk, said: “The university administration acts arbitrarily and according to the needs of existing governments. What is required is a direct intervention to resolve these issues. Until that happens, we have to maintain [our own] continuous interventions.”

The Kelaniya Students Union is affiliated with the Inter University Student Federation (IUSF), which is controlled by the fake-left Frontline Socialist Party.

Siri Sumana’s call for “continuous interventions” is a repetition of the IUSF’s insistence that unending protests will somehow pressure the government to change its policies.

The unbearable and worsening conditions facing students

cannot be reduced to the personal indifference of the administration but are a direct product of the escalating government cuts to all levels of state education.

The Wickremesinghe government is preparing even greater attacks on the higher-education system with plans for new legislation to replace the University Grants Commission with a National Higher Education Commission.

Sri Lankan Minister of Justice Dr Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe, who headed the committee that made this recommendation, told the media last November that “an independent institute will aid in ensuring that quality education is provided for students through the private sector.”

This development, he declared, “will make a massive change in the education sector of Sri Lanka.”

Rajapakshe’s “massive change” is nothing less than another step in the elimination of what remains of Sri Lanka’s free education system by the Wickremesinghe government, in line with its International Monetary Fund (IMF) dictated social assaults.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) stresses that the struggle to overcome student poverty is inseparably connected to the fight against the social disaster the government is imposing on all sections of the working class and the poor.

The defence of free public education is part of a broader struggle to mobilise workers, students and the rural masses in a unified struggle against the social attacks of the Wickremesinghe government, and to put end to capitalism on the basis of the fight for socialist and internationalist policies. Students should fight for this perspective by joining the IYSSE and turning to the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact