

## **Covid-19 increases pressures on Sri Lanka**

Asma Khalid

Covid-19 is spreading rapidly in Sri Lanka much like other countries of the world. Initially, Sri Lankan government didn't take any serious measures against the disease considering their warm climate as a natural protection against Covid-19. However, as the number of confirmed cases rose to 28 by March 16, 2020, alarms started ringing in concerned quarters. This quickly changed the Sri Lankan government's thinking and forced it to take necessary measures for containing further spread of the viral infection and protecting its citizens.

Sri Lankan government is following the Chinese model "lesser the number of human interactions, the slower will the virus spread" to address the outbreak.

- Initially; the government started off by initiating quarantine restrictions on international travelers, suspending visa issuance process and cancelling flights from countries affected by the pandemic.
- Later the government closed down all schools in the country, cancelled/postponed public events and meetings, banned large gatherings, and authorized police to take action against those who violate the restrictions.
- In the third stage, lockdown was imposed in all the districts of the country and inter district traffic and train services were stopped. Colombo Municipal Council closed parks, clinics, sports grounds and libraries. The home delivery services for essential goods was initiated by supermarkets to avoid overcrowding in shopping centers and markets.
- Finally Sri Lankan government imposed curfew in few high risk zones such as Colombo (29 confirmed cases), Gampaha (10 confirmed cases), Kalutara (1 confirmed cases) and Kandy (01 confirmed cases) districts.
- Individuals who arrived in Sri Lanka from Europe, Iran, or South Korea between 1 to 15 March 2020 were directed to register with their nearest police station.

First case of coronavirus in Sri Lanka was reported on March 11, 2020. The first death due to coronavirus was, meanwhile, reported on March 29, 2020. Ministry of Health & Indigenous Medical Services confirmed 122 positive coronavirus cases in Sri Lanka on March 31, 2020. By then another 117 were suspected and hospitalized in addition to more than 4,000, who had been kept in quarantine centers managed by the military. Two people had died because of the viral infection in Sri Lanka by March 31, 2020.

On March 17, 2020 the National Operation Centre for the Prevention of Covid-19 outbreak was established by President Rajapakse. It was stated in the press release issued by the presidency on setting up of the center that it "will coordinate preventive and management measures to ensure that healthcare and other services are well geared to serve the general public." The national operation center has been kept under Army Commander Major General Shavendra Silva instead of medical experts being in the lead.

The government's current strategy is considered as proactive and more responsive than many in the neighbourhood. However, rapidly growing number of cases pose serious socio-economic and political challenges to the government.

Spread of Covid-19 can aggravate economic problems faced by Sri Lanka because of supply chain disruptions. Sri Lanka's Central Bank Governor W.D. Lakshman warned that: "It has increasingly become evident that domestic economic activity during the year 2020 would continue to be affected through various channels by the spread of the pandemic."

- o Tourist industry is considered as one of the vital components of Sri Lanka's economy. Approximately 2.3 million tourists visited Sri Lanka in 2019. The tourist industry is likely to face heavy losses due to the expected steep decline in the number of national and international tourists this year. The first confirmed case, it must be recalled, was that of a Chinese tourist.

- o Sri Lankan election authorities postponed parliamentary elections that were scheduled to be held on April 25, 2020 due to Covid-19 outbreak. The election commission chairman Mahinda Deshapriya announced that "Even if Sri Lanka is declared free of this virus tomorrow, we will not be able to conduct the election on April 25."

- o Besides, the economic and political costs, the spread of Covid-19 has raised concerns about food security and nutrition challenges. The World Food Programme (WFP) stated "The impact and control response of the Covid-19 outbreak in Sri Lanka could potentially compound food security and nutrition challenges due to weather related disasters." This, WFP said, emphasizes the need for special contingency planning by the relevant authorities."

The rapidly increasing Covid-19 confirmed cases, worsening economic situation and issues connected with food security together forced the government to take difficult decisions with prospective economic, political and social costs. It is significant to note that economic and psychological impacts of epidemic can potentially be more far reaching than the epidemic itself. The coronavirus crisis and related misconceptions are prompting fear and anxiety in the society thereby deteriorating psychiatric health. In this regard, it is inevitable to introduce urgent initiatives focused on health and social welfare related issues to address the impact of Covid-19 outbreak.

The World Bank's Board of Executive Directors has approved the \$128.6 million Sri Lanka COVID-19 Emergency Response and Health Systems Preparedness Project to help the country prevent, detect, and respond to the Covid-19 pandemic and strengthen its public health preparedness.

Moreover, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) funded the purchase of emergency medical supplies worth \$ 100,000 through the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to support of Sri Lanka's ongoing response to the novel coronavirus pandemic.

Sri Lankan authorities have, meanwhile, ordered arrest of critics of government's response to the pandemic accusing them of peddling lies and rumours and hindering the execution of official duties. Tamils, ethnic minorities, political dissidents and Muslims fear that the government could further suppress their right in the garb of Covid-19 containment measures. In one instance, forced cremation of

the bodies of Muslims, dying from Corona, upset Muslim community of Lanka, who accused the government of violating Islamic principles and values.

Update: Sri Lanka had 203 confirmed cases on April 12, 2020 and 7 deaths.