

Sri Lankan president says military to impose “discipline” when lockdown ends

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Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapakse declared on Monday night that he plans to use the military and police to impose discipline on Colombo, the country’s largest city, after the government lifts its coronavirus lockdown.

The curfew, he said, was in order to enable “social distancing.” Sections of the police and the military will be needed to “ensure that the situation remains under control, as it was during the war, and ensure that people would not make unnecessary visits and that they act in a disciplined manner.”

Rajapakse’s remarks were made during an hour-long interview, monitored by one of his advisors, and relayed through the electronic media. The event was held in order to create the impression that the government had done everything possible to “control” the virus and to promote its moves to “reopen the economy” in the face of rising COVID-19 infections in Sri Lanka and internationally.

The government previously planned to lift the curfew in the Western Province, which includes Colombo district, last Monday. This was changed after the sudden increase of infections in the district. The curfew will now be lifted this coming Monday.

Rajapakse’s threatening statement is a warning to the entire working class. Deploying military has nothing to do with “social distancing” but is in preparation for the suppression of any unrest in the working class.

Sri Lankan industrialists and big business interests have declared that they plan to cut jobs by 30 percent and slash pensions and other social benefits.

Over the past week, several factories in free trade zones located in the Western Province and other parts of the country were reopened with about 20 percent of their previous workforce.

The World Bank has predicted that Sri Lanka’s

economic growth this year will contract to 3 percent amid lower growth rates in South Asia of between 2.8 and 1.8 percent. Facing mounting debts and an economic decline, the Rajapakse government is preparing ruthless attacks on workers and the poor. It initially plans to call back a section of the public sector to run state services.

President Rajapakse’s “war” reference is to Colombo’s brutal three-decade conflict against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. He was defence secretary during the final years of the conflict that ended in May 2009.

Under his watch, according to UN estimates, tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were killed during the last months of Colombo’s bloody military operations. Sri Lanka’s current defence secretary, retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne, and Army Commander Lt. General Shavendra Silva were in the forefront of this murderous campaign. Rajapakse denies that any war crimes were committed.

During the conflict, Colombo used its repressive Emergency Regulations and the Prevention of Terrorism law, not just in the North and East but throughout the entire country. Hundreds of abductions occurred along with murders and physical attacks against political opponents and journalists, including the killing of *Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunge and the disappearance of journalist Prageeth Eknaligoda.

After the war, the military and police were used to suppress demonstrations of workers and the poor. In 2011, the police shot one worker when 40,000 Katunayake Free Trade Zone workers protested against pension cuts. In 2012, a fisherman was killed by police commandos at a protest in Chilaw, and in 2013, the military gunned down three young people during a

demonstration demanding clean water at Weliweriya in the suburbs of Colombo.

After his election as president last November, Rajapakse quickly appointed senior military officers to fill key government posts, and, following the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, further militarised his administration. This included the elevation of an Army Commander to head the National Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 and the appointment of retired Air Marshal Roshan Gunatilake as the Western Province governor.

During Monday's interview, Rajapakse boosted the military and highlighted, in particular, the role of state intelligence. Sri Lanka's chief of intelligence, he declared, played "a major role in this process, together with me." State intelligence was used to collect information on those infected, trace their contacts and ensure that these individuals were sent to quarantine centres. These, and other measures, are in preparation to implement government and big business demands to force people back to work in unsafe conditions.

Several senior medical experts, along with health workers and related personnel, have publicly criticised the government's return-to-work agenda. Despite this, Rajapakse claimed in his interview that "economic experts are of the view that if we further delay this [return to work], the economy will face a massive problem." Daily wage workers, he said, "have been very badly affected," adding that the Western Province contributes more than 50 percent to the Sri Lankan economy.

Rajapakse's concern about the plight of daily wage workers is bogus. The government has only provided meagre relief packages for low-income workers and the poor while ensuring that the Central Bank hands over billions of rupees to big business and banks.

Like other world leaders who ignored decades of warnings by medical scientists, Rajapakse falsely claimed that his government "understood the danger of this epidemic early on, and took decisive steps to control it."

The truth is that Rajapakse rejected calls for a total lockdown declaring, "Other countries may have the best medical facilities, but we managed to cure infected people with our efforts." This statement was based upon a single infected individual—a Chinese tourist—discovered in Sri Lanka who was treated and

recovered from the disease.

No mass testing, however, was begun, as recommended by the World Health Organisation and called for by Sri Lankan medical specialists. In fact, in the past two months just on 6,000 people have been tested. The Director of Health has admitted to the media, moreover, that these tests were restricted by funding problems and the limited numbers of health workers.

This Rajapakse administration, like previous governments, presides over a rundown and poorly funded health service. Apart from meagre funding for existing hospitals, no new funds have been provided to overhaul the health system. Health workers still do not have adequate personal protection equipment and are risking their lives and those of their patients.

Rajapakse admitted during his interview that "tourism, small and medium industries, apparel industry and others that earned foreign exchange have faced severe setbacks... Even if we bring our economy to a satisfactory level through systematic measures, we will still face difficulties unless the global economy becomes normal."

But this crisis, he continued, "is a good opportunity for us to change economic strategy and direct it towards the indigenous economy ... [but] we cannot only be self-sufficient in agriculture, we can also export our agricultural products to other countries."

Rajapakse's nationalist demagoguery is to cover up the fact that his government is unleashing class war and plans to impose the burden of this crisis onto the backs of workers and the poor.

The working class must take the president's return-to-work measures and threats to use the military seriously. It must respond by mobilising independently from every faction of the ruling class, rallying the rural poor and the oppressed, and uniting with the international working class to fight for a socialist program.



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