

COVID-19 RESPONSE AND COUNTER MEASURES IN SRI LANKA

(Tentative as of 24 April 2020)

INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka got the first confirmed case of corona virus on January 27 2020, who was a 44 year old Chinese woman from Hubei province in China. She had arrived as a tourist with another group of travelers and had been screened at the Bandaranayaka International Airport after having a high fever. She had fully recovered and released later on February 19.

This incident put the health ministry and other relevant authorities more focused on the ongoing crisis in the world. Because even though there were preparedness plans for the corona infection in Sri Lanka there was no actual scenarios occurred until that day.

On 10th March the first SL the first Sri Lankan local national tested positive for covid-19. A 52y old tour guide working with a group of Italians had tested positive. At this moment there were 29 patients under observation in the government hospitals including 8 foreigners. So this chain of incidents caused suspension of on arrival visa for tourists¹.

GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT TIMELINE

While these incidents were happening the government formed a presidential task force in relation with fighting the covid-19 virus which seek cooperation of all sections of the society. The first quick sessions “emphasize the disastrous consequences of behave in irresponsible manners and importance of the cooperation of everyone to the quarantine process commenced with the objective of protecting citizens of SL”

The health ministry which was led by the director general of health services and the defense ministry who featured the commander of the Sri Lanka army contributed to the covid-19 prevention body in cooperation of other sectors².

A. 2020-March week 1 [Active cases 1]

- According to the decisions carried out by the Presidential task force around 685 people have been quarantined at two centers in Batticaloa. Army and health officials have taken steps to provide them with maximum possible facilities within a short period of time. Another 2 centers have also been prepared to use for the purpose of quarantine.
- The Sri Lankans as well as foreigners arriving from South Korea, Italy and Iran has been sent to these centers for 14-day quarantine period and issue a certificate after the period. [Which later considered as mandatory for them to provide when going out of country again]
- Requested other people who arriving from other countries to SL to cooperate with this process by living in isolation in their own houses³.

B. 2020-March week 2 [Active cases 15]

- Visa for Europeans suspended for 2 weeks due to the expanding covid-19 situation

¹ Health Promotion Bureau, COVID-19 Situation report, viewed 15th March 2020, <<https://www.hpb.health.gov.lk/en>>

² Epidemiology Unit, Ministry of health, Message for Public, viewed 10th March 2020, <<http://www.epid.gov.lk/web/index.php?lang=en>>

³ Presidential office, News Archive, President seeks public cooperation to fight COVID-19, viewed 20th April 2020, <<https://www.president.gov.lk/president-seeks-public-cooperation-to-fight-COVID-19/>>

in France and Italy

- 2-week quarantine period for Sri Lankans arriving from Europe
- Measures to disinfect public transport
- Case studies on China's success
- Directives to minimize public gathering
- Experimented the possibility of continuing services provided by state institutions as well as school and university studies through utilizing internet for educational and service purposes.
- Issued directives to inquire about the places the patients visited and people they associated and guide them for quarantine process.
- A discussion has been carried out with the WHO by health authority and WHO agreed to extend its cooperation towards the continuation of measure already taken by Sri Lanka towards prevention of spreading of the disease.
- Attention was drawn to regulate the distribution process of face masks in a manner that it could be purchased from anywhere at a controlled price.
- Firms which can make 150,000 face masks daily have been identified to check for the quality for this crisis.
- Officials were advised to study the methods extensively that china practiced regarding management of social behaviors in a way that contributed to the effective control of the disease.
- Stressed the importance of using electronic, print and social media to educate the people about the disease.^{4 & 5}



Source: <https://alt.army.lk/covid19>

C. 2020- March week 3 [Active cases 86]

- SAARC ministerial meeting was conducted by the Leaders of each country to formulate a collective response to combat COVID-19 and overcome a deadly threat and formulate a mechanism to assist SL economy to tide over the economically difficult period.
- Students who were studying in Wuhan province china [34] were brought back

⁴ Presidential office, News Archive, Concrete Decision to prevent COVID-19, viewed 20th April 2020,

<<https://www.president.gov.lk/concrete-decisions-to-prevent-spread-of-COVID-19/>>

⁵ SL army, National Operation center for prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak, viewed 18st April 2020, <<https://alt.army.lk/COVID-19/>>

according to their request and quarantined for 14-day period. Other 750 people who were in china were asked to self-quarantine. The officials were asked to bring the people of 300 who are currently scattered in India who were on pilgrimage.

- 12 other major government hospitals have been modified and designed to treat suspected or confirmed cases.
- Police have been instructed to find out about the people who were avoiding quarantine process and make people aware of them.
- Those who show flu symptoms have been asked to self-quarantine while seeking medical attention. Police and Public health inspectors were advice to closely monitoring the progress of suspected patients.
- National task force with all major stakeholders empowered to take crucial decisions and setup to meet daily basis.
- Measures has been taken to avoid all large gatherings, including cinema halls, sport events, international conferences and religious gathering.
- All education centers from pre-schools to universities had been closed ranging from 2 weeks to 6 weeks.
- One day of the week has been declared as a public holiday to keep the people away from the roads and sanitizing of public transport.
- A decision has been taken on all the court cases which are to be called at commercial high courts, court of appeal and District courts will not be called at open courts. The ability to obtain information on their cases have been moved back 2 weeks. The released circular advised to take up only the urgent cases at the discretion of judges concerned.
- The congregation of public near prisons will also has been limited but normal banking and trading activities will continue as usual.
- The army commander has been tasked to spearhead the national operation center for prevention of COVID-19 outbreak according to the directives of the president. The newly formed center will coordinate preventive and management measured to ensure that healthcare and other services are well geared to serve the general public⁶.
- Suspended all the inbound passenger flights to the country for 2 weeks. But directed heads of departments and other entities to ensure uninterrupted economic and trading activities as well as other essential services.
- Health ministry formed a provisional clinical practice guideline on COVID-19 suspected and confirmed patients⁷.
- An island wide curfew has imposed for the week end of the 3rd week

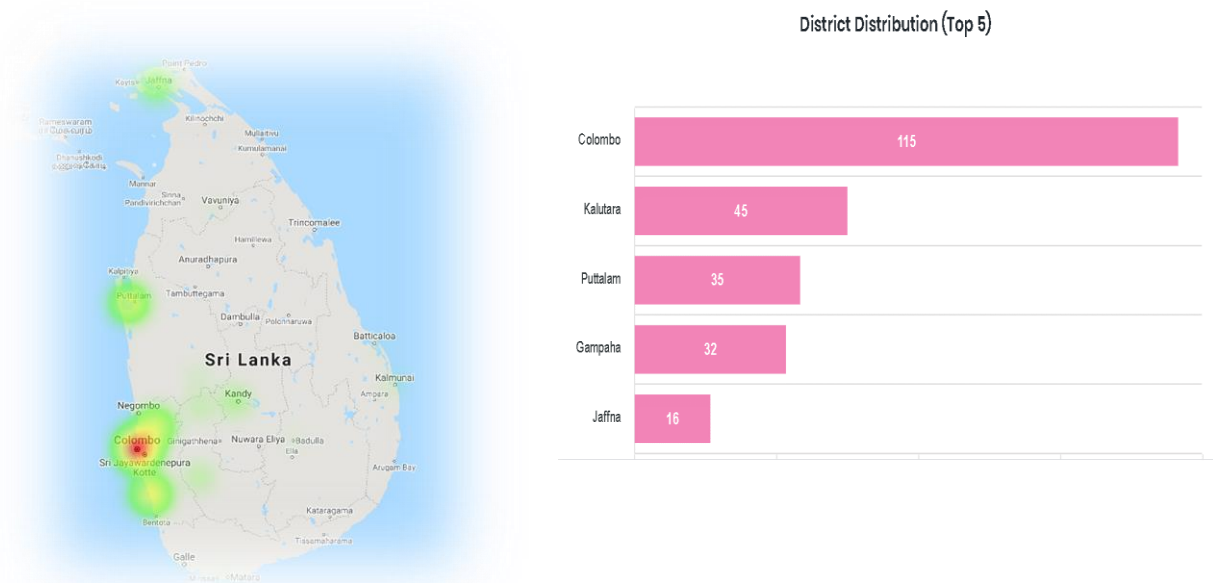


⁶ Presidential office, News Archive, Public gatherings further restricted, viewed 18th April 2020, <<https://www.president.gov.lk/public-gatherings-further-restricted/>>

⁷ Ministry of Health, News updates, Presidential task force, viewed 18th April 2020, <http://www.health.gov.lk/moh_final/english/>

D. 2020-March week 4 [Active cases 105]

- After careful consideration of every aspect, the government has declared a period of work from home for both public and private sectors for 7-day period. When implementing the remote work system, the relevant heads of departments were asked to take steps to limit the summoning their staff to the office. They were asked to take alternate approaches like technological means such as e-mail, SMS, and telephone as well to do the file work from home⁸.
- Authorities were empowered to take steps to ensure continuous supply of essential services including health, public administration, transportation, banking, food, water, electricity, distribution of fertilizer and buying paddy.
- The curfew has been extended to several districts [Colombo, Gampaha, Puttalam] due to increased number of patients in those districts.⁹



Source: <https://hpb.health.gov.lk/covid19-dashboard/>

- Public has been advised not to engage in panic buying since adequate stocks of food and other essential items are being transported to needed places and government supplying centers.
- To prevent imported new cases of Corona virus in the country, the government decided to indefinitely extend the closure of the arrival terminal at the Airport. The departure terminal will continue to be operational and flights are allowed in to the country to take departing passengers. All import and export operations are to continue without interruption.
- Island wide curfew again has been imposed for 4-day period and free period of 8 hours to buy essentials at the end of 4-day period. But the high risk districts [Colombo,

⁸ Presidential office, News Archive, March 'work from home week', viewed 18th April 2020, <<https://www.president.gov.lk/march-20th-to-27th-declared-as-work-from-home-week/>>

⁹ Health Promotion Bureau, Live situational Analysis dashboard of Sri Lanka, viewed 22th April 2020, <<https://hpb.health.gov.lk/COVID-19-dashboard/>>

Kaluthara, Gampaha] are to be continue with the current curfew. All the essential things are being delivered to the door steps including food, medication and mobile ATM machines. To ensure smooth operation of delivering essential consumer goods to each household, a special task force has been established comprised of Secretaries to the ministries, Government agents, Divisional Secretaries and other relevant officers. The vehicles used for the delivery will be permitted on the road during curfew period.

- President has directed the Governor of Central Bank of Sri Lanka, the secretaries of all ministries, chief secretaries of all provincial councils and the heads of all banks, financial institutions and leasing companies to take the appropriate steps accordingly.



Source: <https://www.president.gov.lk/news/>

These relief measures are as following:

- a. To extend until 30 April, 2020 all payments on income and VAT taxes, driving license renewal fees; all bills on water and electricity, assessment taxes, and bank cheques valued less than Rs 15,000; and repayment of all credit cards below the limit Rs. 50,000.
- b. A six-month moratorium on the leasing loan installments of all three-wheelers.
- c. A moratorium on loan installments until 30 May, 2020 from salaries of all public and private (except board of directors) sector employees.
- d. A three-month moratorium on all personal bank and leasing loan installments of value less than Rs. 1 million.
- e. The March trainee allowance of Rs. 20,000 of all graduates selected for employment will be deposited into their respective bank accounts.
- f. To double the Agrahara Insurance benefits for all health, police, civil defense and all government servants engaged in controlling the spread of the COVID19.
- g. A six-month debit moratorium on tourism, garment and small & medium industries and for Central Bank of Sri Lanka to re-evaluate the finances.
- h. Bank of Ceylon, People's Bank, National Savings Bank, Sri Lanka Insurance Cooperation, Employee Provident Fund, Employee's Trust Fund to jointly

invest in the treasury bonds and bills to stabilize the money market at 7% interest rate.

- i. A 15% interest rate of credit cards for domestic transactions of value up to Rs. 50,000.00 and the minimum monthly charge to be reduced by 50%.
 - j. All bank branches to provide their full services to customers when curfew is not in effect.
 - k. Sri Lanka Ports, Customs and other related institutions to release without any interruption to relevant entities food and essentials such as fertilizers, medicines and fuel.
 - l. To provide interest free loans of Rs. 10,000 to Samurdhi recipients and Samurdhi card holders through all Samurdhi Bank Associations.
 - m. To exempt Lanka Sathosa and Co-operative shops from VAT and other local taxes and charges.
 - n. Samurdhi Authority to issue title certificates to Samurdhi and low income families immediately for issuing nutritional food items to low income families. They should be provided with rice, lentils, onions and food cards on weekly basis.
 - o. From the President's Fund, a special bank account has been opened at the Bank of Ceylon for tasks related to preventing the spread of the Coronavirus and for providing the necessary healthcare and relief measures. For this purpose, Rs. 100 million had been deposited from the President's Fund. Tax and foreign exchange control restrictions have been lifted for all local and foreign donors who wishes to contribute to this fund.
- Granted some relief to the prisoners who were charged with minor offences and those who are unable to meet their bail conditions.¹⁰

E. 2020-April week 1 [Active cases 138]

- Government decided to facilitate the farmers on cultivation of rice and vegetables and other animal products such as meat, egg and fisheries without any interruption. The products were expected to deliver through a combined effort between cooperative outlets and supermarkets after purchasing from domestic farmers with the assistance of the center for disaster management.
- A decision was taken to deliver medicines to homes of regular patients who have registered at hospitals with the support of divisional Secretaries, Public health officers and the security forces. It was also discussed to implement a system to distribute medicines through few locally selected pharmacies to patients who purchase medicine from private pharmacies.
- The work from home has been extended for state, semi government and private sector entities except which are categorized as essential services.
- SL port authority has immediately exempted from demurrage and entry charges and

¹⁰ Presidential office, News Archive, viewed 20th April 2020, <<https://www.president.gov.lk/possibility-of-releasing-prisoners-charged-with-minor-offences-explored/>>

offered several reliefs in order to continue regular operations at port.

- a. During the curfew period, yard and warehouse rental charges for imported containers and goods and imported empty containers have been completely removed.
- b. Harbor gate access permits / individual access permits currently available for trucks, lorries, tippers and bowsers used by the Port for its transportation purposes and harbor gate access permits currently available to agencies and companies for their common / private vehicles (vans, cars, motorcycles) are also valid during the curfew period.
- c. The Sri Lanka Police has taken steps to issue licenses for private sector workers engaged in essential and related duties on the recommendation of the Sri Lanka Ports Authority.
- d. Facilities have been arranged to obtain fuel needed for the container / freight carriers operating between the terminals and inter terminals at the port.
- e. SLPA employees engaged in essential services are to be provided sanitation, welfare and transportation facilities¹¹.



source: <https://www.president.gov.lk/home-delivery-of-essential-commodities-begins/>

F. 2020 April week 2 [Active cases 147]

- Government decide of selection of localities to implement curfew and declaration of isolation areas are being taken at the highest level of the government following an in depth analysis of data received in order to minimize the disruption of civilian life.
- Material benefits have been granted to low income and vulnerable families and individuals in the face of COVID-19 outbreak. Following declared concessions and the eligible groups.
 - a. Measures have been taken to pay Rs. 5,000 each to all 416,764 senior citizen allowance recipients and to the recently registered 142,345 senior citizens.
 - b. An allowance of Rs. 5,000 will be provided to 84,071 disabled persons and 35,229 newly registered disabled persons.
 - c. A total of 160,675 farmers who are registered under the Farmers' Insurance Scheme will also receive an allowance of Rs.5000 each.

¹¹ Presidential office, News Archive, viewed 20th April 2020, < <https://www.president.gov.lk/home-delivery-of-essential-commodities-begins/>>

- d. An allowance of Rs. 5,000 will be paid to 25,320 kidney patients and 13,850 newly registered patients.
- e. Thripasha and other nutritional supplements will be delivered directly to the residences of expectant mothers and families with malnourished children
- f. Measures have been taken to provide Rs. 5,000 each to all 1,798,655 Samurdhi recipients and to the recently registered 600,339 Samurdhi recipients by the Samurdhi Bank / Samurdhi Authority.
- g. Payment of the pensions to 645,179 public officers.
- h. Steps will be taken to pay the April salary for 1,500,000 Public Sector employees and loan payment deductions from salaries to be suspended until further notice.
- i. Relief on lease instalments for 1,500,000 self-employed persons, including owners of three-wheelers, trucks, school buses and vans and self-employed motorists.
- j. Reliefs will be provided for the private businesses that are not in a position to pay employees' wages due to the prevailing economic hardships¹².

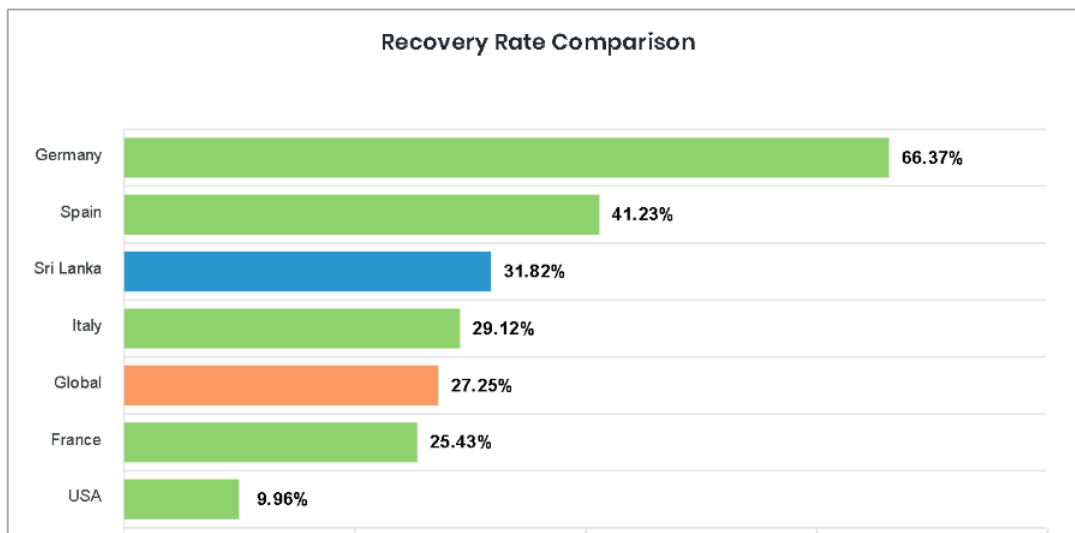
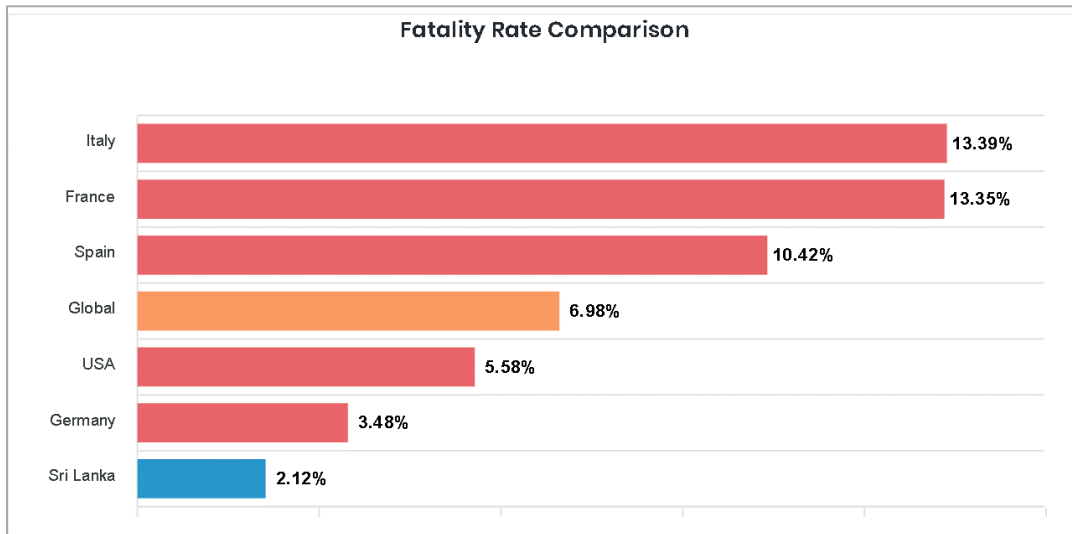


Source: <https://alt.army.lk/covid19/>

- Many private and government officials have been handed over millions from their own official Department Special Fund to the COVID – 19 Healthcare and Social Security Fund.
- A meeting between government officials and medical experts representing various fields was held and the steps taken to prevent the spread of the virus has been appreciated. The future steps have been discussed in length. The health authorities were directed to take necessary actions to acquire more test kits in order to face any situation.
- Since the provision of essential foods and rice production, storage and distribution is imperative to ensure food security, services of the owners of all rice mills have been declared an essential service under the COVID-19 quarantine process¹³.

¹² Economynext, viewed 20th April 2020, <<https://economynext.com/sri-lanka-banks-to-open-2-hours-when-coronavirus-curfew-lifts-online-banking-urged-61122,%20https://economynext.com/sri-lanka-banks-to-open-2-hours-when-coronavirus-curfew-lifts-online-banking-urged-61122/>>

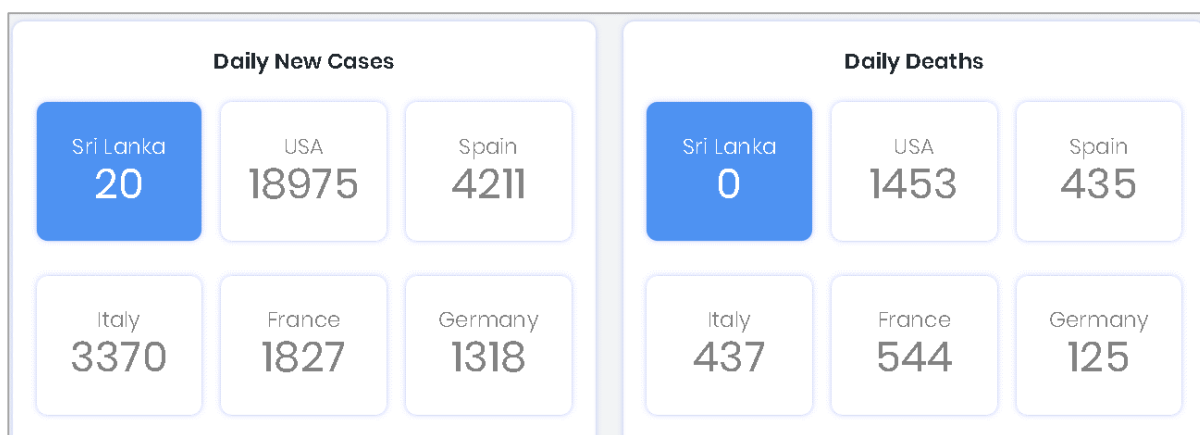
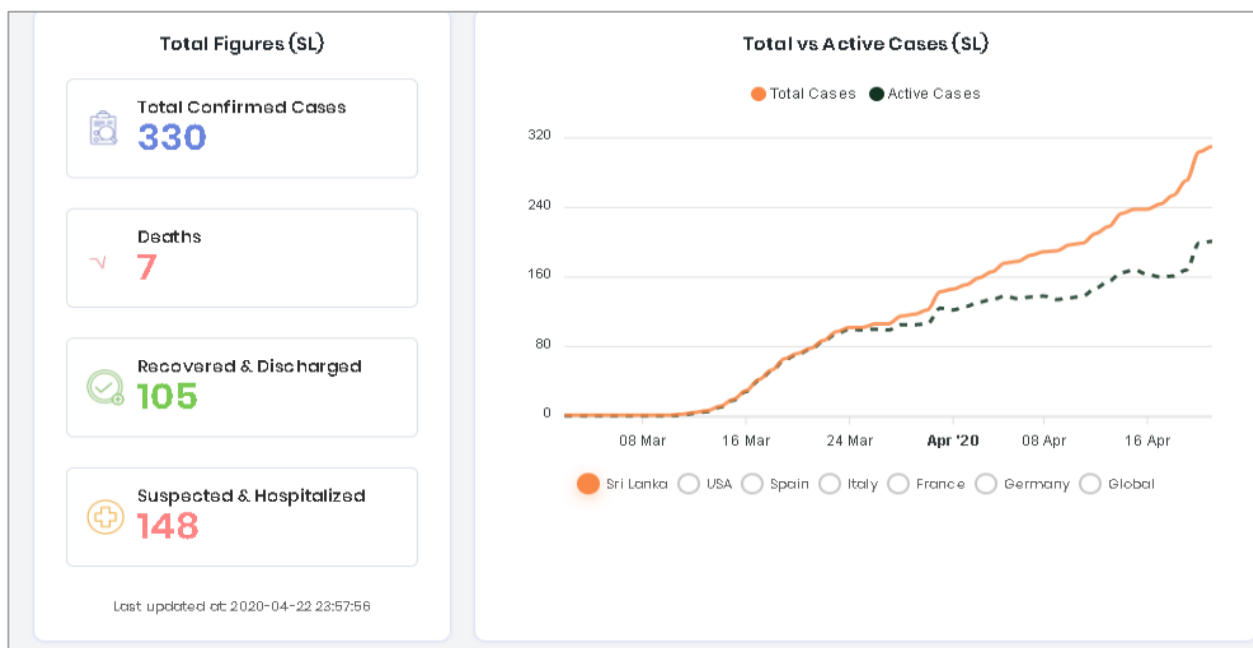
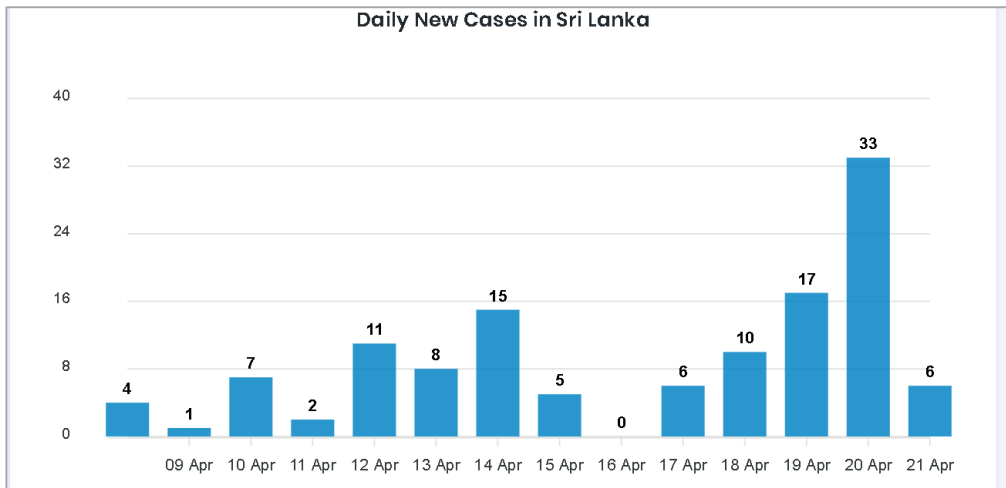
¹³ SL army, National Operation center for prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak, viewed 18st April 2020, <<https://alt.army.lk/COVID-19/>>



Source: <https://hpb.health.gov.lk/covid19-dashboard/>

G. 2020 April week 3 [Active cases 168]

- A meeting was carried out to explore the possibility of immediate resumption of day today economic activities at provincial levels in order to safeguard the national economy with all the provincial directors of health.
- With the objective of restoring normalcy in the civilian life the Government has decided to relax the curfew imposed in order to control the spread of COVID – 19.



(Source: <https://hpb.health.gov.lk/covid19-dashboard/>)

DISASTER MANAGEMENT CENTRE, DISTRICT SECRETARY OFFICE AND DIVISIONAL SECRETARY OFFICE INVOLVEMENT

Sri Lanka has been managing the situations of emergencies through Disaster Management Centre for several decades. This has been utilizing government funds and resources to the wellbeing of the people who were affected during floods, heavy rainy seasons, tsunami, dry seasons and other disastrous conditions. As the government announced the COVID-19 as an emergency situation the regional objectives which needed to reach to the misadventure personals were carried out by the Disaster Management Centre.

- The Presidential Task Force announced that a hotline has been established for to the public to obtain or notify any details regarding the Coronavirus situation. Such inquiries or notifications could be made on the hotline 117. This hotline will be active from 15th March 2020 which was a Joint collaboration with the Disaster Management Centre.



- The distribution of the essential grocery and foods were obtained from the government stocks and private companies. The 'Grama Niladhari' [the village officer in charge of administration works] was responsible for identifying the people who needed the support from the government and under the authority of district secretary and Divisional secretary the distribution of the goods were Divisional Secretary Office.¹⁷

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Many government officials have been deployed to overcome the community depend mistakes occur in the society. Main stakeholders were public health doctors and public health inspectors. General public has been asked to maintain proper hygiene methods and self-quarantine methods to safeguard from the disease.

Main community involvement during the virus outbreak is the provision of essential food and other requirements to the people who has been unable to compensate¹⁴.

¹⁴ Derana, Manusath derana Pragramme, viewed 20th April 2020, < <http://manusathderana.lk/>>



Source: <http://manusathderana.lk/>

According to the guidelines by the authorities, the bodies of deceased COVID-19 patients must be bagged and disinfected while the closest relatives are allowed to see the face of the deceased for a limited time within the hospital and touching of the body is not allowed. Embalming is banned and funeral homes are expected to immediately bag the body and place it in a sealed coffin for religious rituals. Mass gatherings and funeral functions are banned and remains must be cremated within 24 hours of the death¹⁵.

¹⁵ Epidemiology Unit, Ministry of health, viewed 20th April 2020, < <http://www.epid.gov.lk/web/>>



Source: <http://www.epid.gov.lk/web/>

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Both state and private institutions began Research and Development programmes to find solutions to issues created by the Pandemic. Research and Development Unit of Sri Lanka Navy developed a remote-controlled smart appliance called 'Medi Mate' to allow healthcare maintain distance from patients during testing and treatment¹⁶. Medi Mate is wheeled and remote-controlled allowing workers to communicate with patients as well as transport medicine and meals as well as spray sanitizing liquid through an automated nozzle.

The Research and Development Unit of Sri Lanka Navy also developed a disinfection chamber and variants with added features that were placed in Kalubowila Teaching Hospital, Neville Fernando Teaching Hospital and University Hospital KDU.

Vega Innovations, a subsidiary of CodeGen Group of Companies together with the Ministry of Health of Sri Lanka designed a low cost Volume Controlled – Continuous Mandatory Ventilation (VC-CMV) Medical Ventilator that can be produced for a cost under US\$650 per unit¹⁷.

¹⁶ Sri Lanka Navy, Navy develops remote controlled smart appliance, viewed 22nd April 2020, <<https://news.navy.lk/eventnews/2020/04/08/202004081700/>>

¹⁷ Vega innovations, Low cost medical ventilator, viewed 22nd April 2020, <<https://www.vega.lk/articles/2020/04/01/low-cost-medical-ventilator-manufactured-by-vega-innovations-to-support-COVID-19-outbreak/>>



Source: <https://www.vega.lk/articles/2020/04/01/low-cost-medical-ventilator-manufactured-by-vega-Innovations-to-support-covid-19-outbreak/>

Atlas Axillia PLC, a subsidiary of the Hemas Group, developed the Automated Guided Vehicle (AGV) robot which is able to carry food and medicine, perform basic medical check-ups such as checking temperatures, allow doctors to monitor patients remotely and have conversations with them. The AGV recharges itself using a wireless port to further reduce contact with workers. The first prototype was gifted to Base Hospital Homagama¹⁸.

Engineers of faculty of engineering, University of Peradeniya has repaired and developed oxygen respiratory systems and ICU beds. National Science Foundation of Sri Lanka allocated funding to combat COVID-19 pandemic and called proposals from Sri Lankan scientists¹⁸

IMPACT

Elections

On 19 March, Election Commissioner revealed that the 2020 Sri Lankan parliamentary election will be postponed indefinitely until further notice due to the coronavirus pandemic. Sri Lankan government initially insisted that scheduled forthcoming the election would proceed as planned on 25 April despite the coronavirus pandemic, and the authorities banned election rallies and meetings. On April 3, 2020 Sri Lanka's Election Commission wrote to President Rajapaksa to seek court opinion on parliamentary election delay saying that they think that the elections will not be able to complete before June 1st as per of the Parliamentary elections¹⁹.

Tourism

The coronavirus outbreak further affected the downfall of the tourism sector of the country which was recovering slowly from the impact of the 2019 Easter bombings. The tourism sector was directly affected with the decrease of Chinese tourist arrivals.

¹⁸ Sunday observer, Atlas invents robot to support medical, viewed 22nd April 2020, <<http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2020/03/30/news/atlas-invents-robot-support-medical-personnel-combating-coronavirus>>

¹⁹ News in Asia, Corona virus, viewed 15th April 2020, <<https://newsin.asia/sri-lankas-general-election-postponed/>>

Environment

The air quality index shown a drastic improvement in the quality of air in highly dense areas such as Colombo ever since the imposing of indefinite curfews.

Education

The government ordered to close schools for five weeks from 12 March to 20 April which also marks the end of the first term and also the academic school exams slated for the first term were also scrapped. The private tuition classes and tutorials including the Institute of Bankers of Sri Lanka are also closed for two weeks until 26 March. On April 11, 2020, Government announce that new school year was postponed until May 11, 2020²⁰.

Entertainment

The Sri Lankan government imposed ban on public gatherings for two weeks amid coronavirus fears and insisted that the permission should be taken from the police in order to do so. All film theatres, national parks, zoological gardens and botanical gardens throughout the country have been closed until further notice. The Sri Lanka Planetarium has also been shut down until further notice with immediate effect from 17 March²¹.

Economy

The Colombo Stock Exchange closed at a new eight-year low amid the coronavirus fears. The stock market activities were halted for at least 30 minutes on 13 March. On 5 March 2020, the Central Bank of Sri Lanka released monetary policy review and the monetary authority decided to maintain policy interest rates unchanged despite coronavirus outbreak (SDFR fixed at 6.5% and the SLFR fixed at 7.5%). On 16 March 2020, on a surprising move the Central Bank of Sri Lanka revised monetary policy review and cut the policy rates by 25 basis points and also cut the statutory reserve ratio by 1 basis point due to the coronavirus pandemic. The CBSL continued its expansionary monetary policy to prosper the economy. Further the CBSL governor requested the financial institutions to not panic due to the economic impact caused by coronavirus. On 18 March, the Securities and Exchange Commission revealed that the Colombo Stock Exchange to be closed until 19 March. CSE has also been given special holidays on 23 and 24 March.

The Central Bank requested the banking sector to operate banking activities for at least two hours on 23 March and the banks encouraged general public to utilize electronic transactions and ATM services instead of physical cash. Experts revealed that the country is likely to mark a record-low negative growth rate for the first time since 2001 due to the economic pressures caused by coronavirus pandemic.

As of 27 March, the domestic Sri Lankan rupee further depreciated against the US dollar to 191.99 amid the coronavirus pandemic. As of 8 April 2020 the domestic Sri Lankan rupee further

²⁰ Colombogazette, Government schools to be closed, viewed 15th March 2020, <<https://colombogazette.com/2020/03/12/government-schools-to-be-closed-till-april/>>

²¹ Daily News, All cinema, viewed 20th April 2020, <<http://www.dailynews.lk/2020/03/14/local/214436/all-cinema-theatres-closed-until-further-notice>>.

depreciated against the US dollar to 200.47 making history that its first time reaching the Rs200 level or above mark, despite Sri Lankan government's effects to control it.

Several Mega companies in Sri Lanka ranked as top companies in the island announced that they will cut down its employees' salaries from 5% to 35%. These companies include John Keells Holdings, Sri Lankan Airlines, and Sri Lanka's biggest apparel exporter Brandix Lanka to name a few²².

Disclaimer

This report was compiled by an ADRC visiting researcher (VR) from ADRC member countries based on the personal observation.

The views expressed in the report do not necessarily reflect the views of the ADRC.

²² News first, Colombo stock exchange, viewed 15th April 2020, <<https://www.newsfirst.lk/2020/03/13/colombo-stock-exchange-halts-trading-for-the-third-day/>>