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President's Media Division, President's Office, Colombo 01

COVID- 19 crisis spells a new Sri Lanka

In the Global Response to Infectious Diseases index, Sri Lanka and President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has been ranked ninth position. This is an index designed to rank the efficiency and effectiveness of the leadership of the country and the preparedness of its health system to combat COVID-19.

While it is clear that Sri Lanka has been successfully containing and controlling the COVID 19 threat, it is also clear that the crisis is far from over. We are still fighting with an invisible enemy that we have not yet understood fully. The fact that this is a global pandemic further complicates the issue. Staying safe while rescuing our economy from a changing world are the challenges before us.

Still, we have reasons to be optimistic. We have already begun our return journey to normalcy. If the current progression continues, by mid-May schools and universities can reopen for the second term. It is hoped that General Elections too could be held before June, allowing people to exercise their franchise to select the Government that they see fit.

At a recent meeting with the secretaries to the ministries, President discussed the need to ease the curfew to allow public and private sectors to return to work without undue impediments. The need to protect the local economy was emphasized. Ministries were instructed to provide the necessary support for agrarian and fisheries sectors as well as other businesses to recover. President also advocated exploring business avenues to create new economic trends.

A People's Movement Gathering Against COVID- 19

The Administration is clearly not alone in the war against this deadly virus. People from across the society have risen to the challenge. Many young adults have found novel solutions to pressing problems. They have made contributions in manufacturing health and medical equipment locally that are otherwise very expensive, social service activities to help the vulnerable and extending general cooperation despite worries over their income and financial obligations.

The special COVID 19 Healthcare & Social Security Fund that was initiated by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa on March 23 with LKR 100 million from the President's Fund has already exceeded LKR 703 million.

From the inception, contributions have been pouring in from individuals and organizations to this special Fund's account 85 73 73 73 at Bank of Ceylon. On April 1, Akbar Brothers (Pvt) Ltd contributed LKR 50 million. This took the balance to over LKR 242 million. A week later, among many contributors was retired teacher Mr. Sarath Kumara Gurusinghe who donated his entire month's pension. Mr. Uyanahewage Ashoka, whose vision is impaired in both eyes gave LKR 500,000. Their contributions tipped the balance and surpassed LKR 585 million.

April 16 was significant as on this day alone LKR 48 million was collected. Among the notable contributors was Chief Incumbent Venerable Dr. Kirinde Assaji thero from the Gangaramaya temple. The venerable thero gave LKR 10 million from the Gangaramaya Vesak Fund. On behalf of the Kelani University Professors' Association Venerable Dr. Malwane Chandrarathana thero handed over LKR 2.5 million. The Engineers Association of the National Water Supply & Drainage Board also handed over LKR 2.5 million to the Fund. Huawei Technologies Lanka (Pvt) Ltd gave LKR 1.5 million. The Fund also received LKR 1 million from Mr. S. D. Amarasinghe.

This Fund will be managed by a 17-member committee headed by the Central Bank Governor Prof. W.D. Lakshman. The Secretary to the Committee is the Chief Financial Officer at Presidential Secretariat Ravindra J Wimalaweera. Among the office bearers are also Secretary to the Treasury S.R. Attigala, Defense Secretary (Rtd) Major General Kamal Gunaratne, Director General Health Services Dr. Anil Jasinghe, Acting IGP CD Wickramarathna, Director General Sri Lanka Customs Major General G. Wijitha Ravipriya and Lanka Sathosa Chairman Nushad M Perera.

The committee is tasked to utilize this Fund to invest in,

- Securing the necessary purchasing in medicines and testing kits as well as increasing the healthcare capacities;
- Ensuring the health and safety of those in the health sector and in the essential services;
- Financial needs of children, women, low income earners, elders, physically challenged and other vulnerable sectors;
- Integrating public health systems, rural and remote dispensaries, testing and treatment centers and health care systems to reduce the risk of infectious diseases;
- Supporting the health sectors through innovation and production of indigenous medicines via resources, knowledge and skills in the country;
- Promoting in the global market the protective clothing and hygiene products developed through our knowledge and experience in medical and scientific fields;
- The media and educational campaigns to promote a healthy lifestyle centered on our traditional values and organic food.

In the meantime, Chief Incumbent of Lankarama Venerable K Gunarathana thero who is the Religious Advisor of the Mahakaruna Buddhist Society in Singapore along with the Sri Lankan High Commissioner Shashikala Premawardena and Chairman of Humanity Matters Association Ong Keng Yong handed over to the Presidential Secretariat LKR 10 million worth medical equipment to combat the COVID 19 crisis in Sri Lanka.

Turning the Economic Tide Around

On March 10 the first Sri Lankan was found to be infected with COVID-19 virus. As a precautionary measure April vacations were given to all schools, including universities on March 13. The special public holiday given soon after was extended to an all Island curfew by March 20. Everyone was asked to work from home except those in essential services, agrarian sector and media.

Naturally this disrupted the speed of the economic machinery and many business processes stalled. Sectors like tourism that were just recovering after last year's Easter Sunday massacres were seriously affected.

By March 30 the Sri Lankan Rupee began to feel the pressure and began to slide against the US dollar. It fell to LKR 191.99 and from that point onwards began to steadily fall. However, on April 07 the Rupee suddenly plunged from LKR 193.75 to LKR 199.40 per USD. Two days later the Rupee fell to LKR 200.47.

The Administration however kept a very steady hand. The State machinery continued to support the vulnerable societies including low income families, Samurdhi beneficiaries, pensioners and differently abled. They were given an additional LKR 5,000 as a means of financial support. The State also bought 900,000 kg of fresh produce from the farmers.

Steps were also taken to rescue a number of Sri Lankans who were trapped in vulnerable places overseas. The other Sri Lankan expatriates are asked to remain in their host countries until the situation in Sri Lanka settles. However, the Sri Lankan missions are all functioning and ready to assist Sri Lankan expatriates in this difficult time period.

At the same time, non-essential imports were banned. An appeal was made to the Sri Lankan expatriate community to remit foreign currency to ease the pressure off the LKR. Economic activities have been allowed to resume in a controlled fashion.

As citizens Sri Lankans are responding very positively. Many corporate top executives have decided to take pay cuts instead of laying off their employees. The Rupee has already started to recover because of this collective effort. On April 15 it appreciated to LKR 195.49 against the USD.

It is very clear that we are walking on a tightrope. Balance is of utmost importance to meet the current challenges as well as the ones ahead. However, people have shown the commitment and the courage. The State machinery from security to health and social services has complimented the political will. Victory over COVID-19 deadly virus is well within our hand. It is up to all of us not to let this victory slip out through our fingers.

President's Media Division

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