"There was one student, a friend of mine, who came to the exam as usual. But later we learned that his mother works at a garment factory and had undergone a PCR test for COVID-19," Chameera\*, a 19-year-old Advanced Level (A/Level) student from Negombo who sat for his exam in October, told Roar Media.

"At first, he sat for the exam with us. But a couple of days later, the invigilators came in and took him to a separate room. He was isolated. Other students were somewhat afraid and we still don't know how it affected him mentally during the exam. We couldn't talk to him afterwards."

Commissioner General of Examinations, Sanath Pujitha, told Roar Media that 568 students sat for their G.C.E A/Level Examination — one of the three prominent national examinations in a Sri Lankan school student's life — at quarantine centres, isolated or at a special exam centre, segregated from their peers. This includes 29 students who had tested positive for the virus, who were allowed to sit for the exam under special conditions at the national Infectious Diseases Hospital (IDH).

Riddled with delays and controversy, this year's G.C.E A/Level examination was finally held last month amid the growing second outbreak of COVID-19.

The examination, scheduled to be held in August earlier, was postponed due to the spread of COVID-19 and the government's decision to implement curfew in parts of the country. The exam was postponed twice this year, and according to several students who spoke to Roar Media, the decisions had had an obvious impact on their studies.

"My biggest concern was that we wouldn't be able to sit for the exam this year," Sheruni (19), a commerce student from Colombo, told Roar Media. "There was always the possibility that they [the government] might postpone it again or even worse, that the exams would get postponed halfway through."

A total of 362,824 candidates registered to sit for the A/Level examination this year. Running for approximately 14 days, the examination is the final step in a student's schooling career before they begin higher education.

During the first half of 2020, the government, faced with the unprecedented problem of the pandemic, was forced to impose a nationwide lockdown. The extended COVID-19 curfew resulted in closure of schools, tuition classes and study groups, as health authorities made social distancing the primary focus.

As a result, many students were confined to their homes. Classrooms were forced to go online, with teachers, school administration and students having to experiment with digital distance learning/teaching — a first, for most of them.

“Many thought that since we were at home and we were safe that we could study 24/7. But it was actually not the case," complained Thenuki (19), a political sciences student.

"At the end of the day, we are also human. We can't study the whole day. It was not about the surroundings, it was about our mentality. We had to study online and our classes were online. We were always stuck at home. It affected us mentally, because we had technical problems. When we had online classes, our WiFi would stop working, our data would get over. Or there would be power cuts. I remember very clearly, the day before my first paper, there was a power cut for four hours. I had to revise my economic tutes in candlelight. It was an unusual and new experience for us."

For the first time in Sri Lanka, a majority of local schools and educational institutions had to seek out digital solutions due to the nationwide lockdown. This transition from traditional classrooms to online classrooms proved difficult for many. According to mathematics student Aamir (19), online classes did not provide the same experience where one could learn as much as you can while physically present.

“There was this whole thing where you have to show what you're writing to a camera, and it just takes more time and when you're not there face-to-face you can't show them [the tuition teacher] what you're doing. You had to explain it," Aamir said.

For many others, like Tharushi (19), a non-science subject student, the biggest concern was whether or not they had prepared enough for the exam.

"It's true that we got an extended time to study and prepare for the exam but from my personal experience — and I'm sure many of those who faced the exam this time would agree with me on this — the fact that the exam was postponed many times was rather very stressful and was in a way very demotivating. It's easier for us to assume that having extra time will help us do a lot more for the exam, but after being through such a situation and having to face an examination in the midst of this, for a majority of us it wasn't very helpful and neither was it functional," she said.

Once the first wave of COVID-19 had subsided and the government called off the curfew in June, life seemed to return to normal. Although mass tuition classes, where normally around 500-1,000 students would flock to a single study hall, were restricted by the health regulations, many students found a way to attend smaller and more accessible tuition classes.

"For about an entire month I had absolutely no tuition since the situation was so uncertain," commerce student Ranudi (19) told Roar. "Teachers were unsure about how to transition to online learning and whether online learning was even necessary, so there was very little support for students. When online classes finally did start, it was difficult to adjust to them because focusing became very hard."

This year’s examinations took place from 12 to 26 October amid strict health guidelines, imposed to prevent the spread of the virus.

Candidates from the Gampaha district where the quarantine curfew was in effect, and those who sat for the examination in other districts, were permitted to take the examination at 12 designated examination centres, set up by the Ministry of Education.

In addition, the admission cards for the examination were used as a curfew pass.

"The process was only slightly different from our previous exams," Ranudi said. "We had temperature checks before every paper we wrote, and the invigilators wore masks and gloves. While we were supposed to observe social distancing, no one practiced it strictly, which really concerned me. It's difficult to follow social distancing guidelines when there weren't any measures to make sure it was carried out properly."

According to Tharushi, "It looked like a normal exam hall but definitely felt different since everyone was being much more careful compared to previous times."

"Most people thought this time the exam would be easy," Theruni said. "They thought we'd be able to leave home late because of the curfew, people won't be travelling as much. It was not the case because we had to be present one hour earlier than usual. Our temperatures had to be checked. We had to wash our hands. There was a huge procedure. We had to fill a form on the first day and hand it over to them [invigilators]. We had to update them if we travelled by public transport or privately. We had to wear the mask, which was quite uncomfortable."

With two of the three national examinations out of the way (the Grade Five scholarship examination was also held earlier this October under similar regulations), there is only one more examination that needs to be organised: the G. C. E. Ordinary Levels.

The examination, held annually in December, will now be held from 18-28January next year due to the pandemic. The government is expected to follow the same health regulations, if a COVID-19 vaccine is not discovered by then.

\*Name has been changed as requested.

Cover credit: AFP/Reuters

Approximately 11 leopard deaths have been reported this year. Do the statistics reveal a growing threat to the leopard population?

#leopard #deaths #srilanka #lka #traps #snares #humanleopardconflict #roarmedia

For many children, the pandemic has meant more time spent online. A new interactive course in Sinhala, Tamil and English aims to educate kids on internet safety, responsibility and relevant awareness.

What potential does human biology hold? What are the limits of human evolution and what are it's social, political and cultural consequences? This is what #Vikaari seeks to answer.

A photo of a herd of #elephants foraging for food at a #garbage dump in #SriLanka recently took the world by storm — even winning first prize at the Royal Society of Biology (UK) photography competition. The heartbreaking photos were also widely circulated in publications around the world. This is how photographer Tharmapalan Tilaxan stumbled on this groundbreaking story.

The number of patients from the #Minuwangoda #COVID19 cluster is still increasing. This is the seventh major cluster of the virus in #SriLanka. Here's an overview of all the major clusters since January. #LKA #lka

After almost two months of successfully mitigating the spread of COVID-19, a sudden unexpected surge of new cases has given way to renewed fears of community transmission in the country.

Over hundred new cases have been reported today from the community and there are serious concerns the island will be subject to another lockdown that may also last months.

But first, where from this new cluster?

This seventh major cluster to be reported—the first after the government announced they had successfully prevented community transmission of COVID-19 in May—came to national attention when an apparel factory worker, aged 39, from Divulapitiya in the Gampaha district tested positive for COVID-19 while admitted at the Gampaha Hospital.

She had fallen ill on 28 September and been admitted to the Gampaha Hospital on 30 September, where, when tested for COVID-19 prior to discharge, as per current regulations, she had tested positive for the virus.

She was then promptly transferred to the National Infectious Diseases Hospital (IDH) in Colombo, and her immediate family, 15 hospital officials and 40 others who had worked with her at the apparel factory in Minuwangoda advised to self-quarantine.

The government acted swiftly, imposing an immediate police curfew on the areas of Minuwangoda and Divulapitiya—and later Veyangoda—as they embarked on the process of contact tracing.

Although the 39-year-old garment factory worker is the vector for the current cluster of COVID-19, the source of the virus has not yet been established.

It is for this reason, Head of the National Operation Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak (NOCPCO) Lt. General Shavendra said, curfew was being imposed in these areas.

“All those who have travelled through the area in the past days should also take precautions,” he told the media on Sunday (4). “Curfew will only be lifted once the source is traced. It is a matter of hours or days.”

PCR testing on contacts yesterday revealed that the 16-year-old daughter of the patient had also tested positive for the virus. By this morning, the numbers had exceeded seventy, and it is likely the figures will increase in the coming days as the government and health authorities intensify testing.

Acting swiftly, the Education Ministry, the Archdiocese of Colombo, the Buddhist Affairs Ministry—among others—declared an early start to school holidays that were due to begin at the end of this week.

Thereby, all government, private and international schools, as well as Buddhist religious ‘Daham Pasal’ have been closed until further notice. Tuition classes in the Gampaha and neighboring Colombo district have also been temporarily halted.

In addition to these, health authorities have directed the public’s attention to health regulations published as the country came out of a three-month lockdown in May, noting that many had taken light of the situation and were not taking precautions as they should.

Head of the Epidemiology Unit of the Ministry of Health, Chief Epidemiologist Dr Sudath Samaraweera reminded the public they must not socialise any more than needed, need to stay at home as much as possible, and to maintain a minimum of 1-metre distance from each other when out in public, as well as to ensure that face masks are worn when out and to ensure that hands are washed frequently.

Speaking to the media yesterday (4), Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva said the next 72 hours would be critical to monitor and ascertain if those who had visited the apparel factory employees had contracted the virus or not, after it was revealed that a number of others from outside the factory had visited in the past days.

The patient in question had also used a company-owned private bus to travel to and from work, and those who travelled alongside her have also been directed to self-quarantine.

While there is no indication the country will be forced into a lockdown yet, Chief Epidemiologist Dr Sudath Samaraweera has certainly sounded the alarm, calling for more public cooperation and vigilance.

"After two months we have detected COVID-19 from among the community. This could continue in the future. It may already be in the community. So we must adhere to all health precautions,” he said.

Editor's Note —The number of cases was updated from 88 to over 100 to reflect the day’s tally of cases and the number of clusters were updated from six to seven.

Can a better a relationship between universities and law enforcement be the solution against ragging?

Sri Lanka's first trash trap - the Ocean Strainer - collects a minimum of 35 kilos of plastic waste on a daily basis. Here's everything you need to know about it.

Following the advent of the ninth parliament led by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the introduction and enactment of yet another amendment to the constitution of the country is not far off.

The proposed amendment to the Constitution of Sri Lanka will mark the 20th instance it will be amended since its introduction.

With this on the horizon, it is vital to look back and educate ourselves on the constitutional history of the nation.

The constitution of a country is considered the supreme law of the state; the body of fundamental principles according to which a state and its citizens are acknowledged to be governed.

Sri Lanka has had two colonial constitutions and two republican constitutions.

The Donoughmore Constitution was the first constitution that was introduced during the British occupation.

Created by the Donoughmore Commission, the constitution served Ceylon from 1931 to 1947.

This constitution enabled general elections with adult universal suffrage: the first time a country under the care of the British Empire observed the one-person, one-vote principle and was given the power to control domestic affairs. Universal suffrage meant that women could vote — and therefore Ceylon became the first Asian country in which women voted at an election.

These reforms also saw the establishment and the transfer of (some) power to the Ceylon State Council, the predecessor of the Parliament of Sri Lanka, which came into being in later years.

Geoffrey Butler, one of the four members of the Donoughmore Commission, writing to D R Wijewardene (founder of the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd.) said, "After all, a Constitution is so much more than a mere document. It is a piece of history and demonstration of ideas. I felt that Ceylon was at a turning point in history. It is unquestionably the most politically advanced of the Colonies..."

However, the Constitution was not without its faults; the reforms required residence qualification to vote, which prevented migrant Tamil labourers from voting. Communal representation was replaced with territorial representation. Ultimately, this led to Tamil politicians boycotting the first election held under the new constitution, the 1931 Ceylonese State Council election.

In 1944, the second colonial constitution was introduced to the country, under the guidance of the Soulbury Commission, which was similar to its predecessor the Donoughmore Commission.

The reforms brought forward by the constitution ushered Dominion status ( a semi-independent Commonwealth realm) and eventually granted independence to Sri Lanka in 1948.

The constitution was drafted by D. S. Senanayake, who led the Board of Ministers under the advice of Sir Ivor Jennings, an eminent British scholar. The draft abandoned the Donoughmore Constitution and the formulation of a model akin to the Westminster system practised in the United Kingdom.

This meant that a House of Representatives was created, with power over domestic affairs, but exclusive authority over the defence and external affairs continued to be relegated to the British governor-general of Ceylon. A cabinet of ministers with a prime minister was responsible for the House of Representatives under the reforms brought forward by the constitution.

The main concern of minority representation following the Donoughmore Constitution was addressed through the Soulbury reforms when the electorates were delimited (setting out electoral boundaries to fix constituencies) in a new way to ensure that minority groups would secure more seats.

Even after gaining independence from Britain on 4 February 1948, the country remained a commonwealth of the British Empire. It was not until 16 May 1972 that the nation officially proclaimed itself as an independent republic.

The first republican constitution of the nation witnessed the country's name being changed from 'Ceylon' to 'Sri Lanka'.

Replacing the Soulbury Constitution with a new and improved one became a priority after the United Front alliance led by Sirimavo Bandaranaike won the 1970 general election with a two-thirds majority.

In their mandate prior to the election, they noted, "We seek your mandate to permit the members of Parliament you elect to function simultaneously as a Constituent Assembly to draft, adopt and operate a new Constitution. This Constitution will declare Ceylon to be a free, sovereign and independent Republic pledged to realise the objectives of socialist democracy; and it will also secure fundamental rights and freedoms to all citizens.”

However, Radhika Coomaraswamy in her essay titled ‘The 1972 Republican Constitution in the Postcolonial Constitutional Evolution of Sri Lanka’, highlighted: ‘The 1972 Constitution was in many ways a symbolic assertion of nationalism, twenty-five years after independence.’

Accordingly, Bandaranaike convened a number of committees to draft a new constitution that was tabled in parliament, voted in and adopted on 22 May 1972 by a vote of 119 for and 16 against. The constitution was challenged by opposing parties—the United National Party (UNP) and other Tamil parties—who walked out of proceedings.

Under the reforms brought forward by the new constitution the following points can be identified as being key features:

In the 1977 general election, the UNP won majority power in parliament. This was the largest victory a single political party managed to achieve in the country's political history.

Making use of this momentum, the UNP's J R Jayewardene sought to abolish the 1972 constitution with a new legislature. Accordingly, the new constitution that came into being on 7 September 1978 provided for a unicameral parliament and a powerful Executive President. Jayewardene became the country's first executive president, after the new reforms were passed, and R. Premadasa was appointed the Prime Minister.

The new reforms introduced a form of multi-member proportional representation for elections to parliament, which was to consist of 196 members. However, the role of the parliament was somewhat reduced with the inclusion of the executive presidency; now the president could dissolve parliament a year after it was elected.

The reforms also introduced the use of referendums to approve critical changes to the constitution.

Since then, the constitution has gone through several amendments. Most provisions of the constitution can be amended by a two-thirds majority in parliament.

Following are the amendments:

First Amendment (20 November 1978): This amendment held that certain cases heard by the Court of Appeal could be transferred to the Supreme Court.

Second Amendment (26 February 1979): Amendments made to the procedure of resignations and expulsion of Members of Parliament.

Third Amendment (27 August 1982): To enable the president seek re-election four years from the first term. Accordingly, the president must declare his intention to appeal for a mandate for a further term, at any time after the expiration of his first term of office.

Fourth Amendment (23 December 1982): Extension of term of parliament. The amendment came into effect after a referendum held in December 1982.

Fifth Amendment (25 February 1983): To provide for a by-election when a vacancy in parliament is not fulfilled.

Sixth Amendment (8 August 1983): Prohibiting violation of territorial integrity: the amendment prohibited citizens from advocating for the establishment of a separate state within the country. The amendment was criticised at the time, as it followed the 1983 Black July riots.

Seventh Amendment (4 October 1983): Dealt with High Court Commissioners; the creation of Kilinochchi District which brought the number of administrative districts in the country to 25.

Eighth Amendment (6 March 1984): President's powers increased to appoint President's Counsels.

Ninth Amendment (24 August 24 1984): Amendment to adjust the salary scales of public officers who are not qualified to be elected as Members of Parliament.

Tenth Amendment (6 August 1986): To repeal the section requiring a two-thirds majority for Proclamation under the Public Security Ordinance.

Eleventh Amendment (6 May 1987): Reformed judicial powers of the High Court to address first time offences; to provide for Fiscals and Deputy Fiscals (prosecutors) for the whole island; also relating to sittings of the High Court, the number of minimum judges at a Court of Appeal case was amended.

Twelfth Amendment (25 September 1987): Even though it was proposed on 25 September 1987, it was not enacted due to technical errors.

Dr Asanga Welikala, an expert in constitutional law who is currently Director of the Edinburgh Centre for Constitutional Law, explained to Roar that the bill for the 12th Amendment was presented in Parliament by MP Dinesh Gunawardene, who was then a member of the Opposition.

“In terms of Standing Order 47(5) which then prevailed (now repealed), the procedure for a bill for the amendment of the constitution required a 'Ministerial Report' to Parliament. The then government did not provide such a report and the bill fell,” he said.

“However, due to a procedural anomaly, the unsuccessful bill was counted as an amendment for the purpose of numbering constitutional amendments. Therefore, even though there was in fact no Twelfth Amendment, when the next amendment to the constitution was enacted on 14 November 1987, it was numbered as the Thirteenth Amendment. That numbering has since been followed, enshrining the phantom Twelfth Amendment in the annals of constitutional history.”

Thirteenth Amendment (14 November 1987): To make Tamil an official language and English a link language; the establishment of Provincial Councils and the devolution of power to the provinces; reforms to Appeal Court powers; amendments to the Public Security Ordinance.

Fourteenth Amendment (24 May 1988): Extension of the president’s legal immunity; increase number of Members of Parliament to 225; the validity of referendum; appointment of Delimitation Commission for the division of electoral districts into electoral zones; proportional representation and the cut-off point to be 1/8 of the total polled; apportioning of the 29 National List members.

Fifteenth Amendment (17 December 1988): To repeal Article 96A in order to eliminate electoral zones.

Sixteenth Amendment (17 December 1988): To make provision for Sinhala and Tamil to be languages of administration and legislation.

Seventeenth Amendment (3 October 2001): To make provisions for the Constitutional Council and Independent Commissions, which includes the Election Commission, Judicial Services Commission and the Police Commission; amendments to the appointments made by the president.

Eighteenth Amendment (8 October 2010): To remove the limit to the re-election of the president and to propose the appointment of a Parliamentary Council that decides the appointment of independent posts like members of the election and human rights commissions and Supreme Court judges.

Nineteenth Amendment (28 April 2015): To annul the 18th Amendment and reintroduce the 17th Amendment that established independent commissions and limited the powers of the executive president; to limit the term of the president's office to five years while the president continues to function as the Head of State, Head of Cabinet and Head of Security Forces.

The proposed 20th Amendment to the Constitution has been in the pipeline for over two years since being introduced in 2018. The proposal was tabled in parliament by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) with the explicit aim to abolish the executive presidency, which was weakened by the 19th Amendment.

However, the drafted reforms proposed by the government, which was gazetted earlier this month, are completely different from those put forward by the JVP.

The new Rajapaksa government has claimed that it will effectively repeal the 19th Amendment but retain some of its "salient features".

According to Cabinet co-spokesperson Minister Keheliya Rambukwella, these salient features include the two five-year term limits imposed on the president.

A five-member committee composed of Rambukwella and Ministers G. L. Peiris, Dinesh Gunawardena, Nimal Siripala de Silva and Ali Sabry has been tasked with reviewing all Cabinet papers, notes and drafts already presented on constitutional reform. The committee is also responsible for proposing a panel of eminent persons to formulate a new constitution.

"[Constitutional reform] was in our election manifesto, it was clearly stated with regard to the 19th amendment. The public has mandated it," Rambukwella noted in August.

Read more about the 20th Amendment and the reforms proposed here.

The Sri Lanka Medical Association recently broke silence over the matter of legalising marijuana in the country.

The first draft of the proposed 20th Amendment to the Constitution is here and to no one’s surprise. Although the first version of the 20th Amendment was introduced, drafted, and billed in Parliament by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna in 2018, the new government’s version promotes and parades entirely new reforms.

Once passed, these reforms will become the 20th instance where the country’s constitution was amended by an empowered government, as a result of fulfilling a public mandate. The full draft of the amendment as gazetted can be read here.

The following is an overview of some of the proposed reforms:

While almost all reforms proposed in the draft to the 20th Amendment are noteworthy, reinstating the all-powerful executive powers of the president instantaneously becomes the most highlighted.

The 20th Amendment will restore all executive powers of the president, which were scaled down by the 19th Amendment to the Constitution by the previous government back in 2015.

The age of a person qualified to be elected to office as President, as dictated by the 1978 Constitution, was 30. This was increased to 35 under the 19th Amendment, only to be lowered to 30 again under the 20A.

It will also lift restrictions on the number of cabinet members and junior ministers who can be appointed.

Provisions relating to this as per the 19th Amendment, which declared that the president must seek the advice of the prime minister prior to making appointments, have also been removed. The president will now be able to exercise these powers on his own accord.

Article 44. (1) “The President shall, from time to time, in consultation with the Prime Minister, where he considers such consultation to be necessary –

(a) determine the number of Ministers of the Cabinet of Ministers and the Ministries and the assignment of subjects and functions to such Ministers; and

(b) appoint from among the Members of Parliament, Ministers to be in charge of the Ministries so determined.”

The 19th Amendment also repealed Article 35 of the Constitution, which provided immunity to the president from class-action lawsuits and replaced it with limited immunity. This, too, has been abolished — giving full immunity to the president.

Article 35. (1) While any person holds office as President, no proceedings shall be instituted or continued against him in any court or tribunal in respect of anything done or omitted to be done by him either in his official or private capacity.

(2) Where provision is made by law limiting the time within which proceedings of any description may be brought against any person, the period of time during which such person holds the office of President shall not be taken into account in calculating any period of time prescribed by that law.

(3) The immunity conferred by the provisions of paragraph (1) of this Article shall not apply to any proceedings in any court in relation to the exercise of any power pertaining to any subject or function assigned to the President or remaining in his charge under paragraph (2) of Article 44 or to proceedings in the Supreme Court under paragraph

(2) of Article 129 or to proceedings in the Supreme Court under Article 130 (a) relating to the election of the President or the validity of a referendum or to proceedings in the Court of Appeal under Article 144 or in the Supreme Court, relating to the election of a Member of Parliament:

Provided that any such proceedings in relation to the exercise of any power pertaining to any such subject or function shall be instituted against the Attorney-General.”

The proposed reforms will replace the Constitutional Council with a much weaker Parliamentary Council with diminished powers.

“Article 41A. (1) The Chairmen and members of the Commissions referred to in Schedule I to this Article and the persons to be appointed to the offices referred to in Part I and Part II of Schedule II to this Article shall be appointed to such Commissions and such offices by the President.

In making such appointments, the President shall seek the observations of a Parliamentary Council (hereinafter referred to as “the Council”)...”

The Constitutional Council, introduced under the 17th Amendment to the Constitution, was the body responsible for appointing members to independent commissions. It was eventually replaced with a different body (the same institution that will replace it under the 20A) in 2010. The Council was empowered after being reintroduced under the 19th Amendment with more powers and the addition of civil society members.

Its replacement — the Parliamentary Council — will consist of the Prime Minister, the Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition, a nominee of the Prime Minister and nominee of the Leader of the Opposition. The latter two must be Members of Parliament.

The three civil society members who held membership in the Constitutional Council will no longer continue to have their seats in the new Parliamentary Council’s composition.

Furthermore, the proposed amendment seeks to allow dual citizens to sit in Parliament.

A citizen of Sri Lanka who is also a citizen of another country — a dual citizen — was disqualified from competing in elections and entering Parliament as per the 19th Amendment. However, the 20A will allow dual citizens to be elected to Parliament.

Under the 19th Amendment, a parliament must remain in power for a four-and-a-half year term before the president can use executive powers to dissolve it. However, this will change under the 20A when the president obtains the power to dissolve or prorogue Parliament after one year of its election.

“Article 70 of the Constitution is hereby amended by the repeal of paragraph (1) of that Article, and the substitution therefor of the following paragraph:-

“(1) The President may, from time to time, by Proclamation summon, prorogue and dissolve Parliament:

Provided that –

(a) subject to the provisions of sub-paragraph (d), when a General Election has been held consequent upon a dissolution of Parliament by the President, the President shall not thereafter dissolve Parliament until the expiration of a period of one year from the date of such General Election, unless Parliament by resolution…”

The president will obtain superior authority over the appointment of independent commission members, including the Elections Commission, the Human Rights Commission and five other similar bodies.

A majority of the independent commissions have survived under the 20A:

However, the Audit Service Commission and the National Procurement Commission will be abolished.

“Article 107 of the Constitution is hereby amended by the repeal of paragraph (1) of that Article and the substitution therefor of the following paragraph:-

“(1) The Chief Justice, the President of the Court of Appeal and every other Judge of the Supreme Court and the Court of Appeal shall be appointed by the President by Warrant under his hand.”.

The president will further retain powers to appoint the Chief Justice and the judges of the Supreme Court, the President and judges of the Court of Appeal, the members of the Judicial Service Commission with the exception of its Chairperson, the Attorney General, the Auditor General, the Parliamentary Commission for Administration (Ombudsman), and the Secretary-General of Parliament.

The president did not have the power to make these appointments under the 19th Amendment, unless they were approved by the Constitutional Council.

The appointment of the Chief Justice and the two most senior judges of the Supreme Court were made by the Judicial Service Commission under the 19th Amendment.

Another step done away with under the 19th Amendment that is making its reappearance is the parliamentary urgent bills.

Accordingly, a Bill considered urgent for the sake of national interest by the Cabinet of Ministers, can be referred directly to the Supreme Court by the president, seeking a ruling on its constitutionality. The reforms require the Supreme Court to provide a ruling within 24 hours to three days. The Bill can then be tabled in Parliament, debated and passed on the same day.

This means that the two-week period in which a Bill is published in the Gazette and tabled in Parliament will be reduced to one week.

The draft to the 20A was approved by the cabinet of ministers and was promptly gazetted on September 2.

While the draft is pending debate in Parliament prior to formally being legislated, dissent against the drafted reforms have already surfaced, and not just from opposition parties.

Reports have suggested that despite cabinet approval, several government members have voiced their opposition against the proposed reforms. Many of the challenges have focused on the abolishing of the National Audit Commission and the inclusion of dual citizens as parliamentarians.

Due to this, the government is said to be considering the incorporation of further changes to the draft during the committee stage of the parliamentary debate.

Similarly, others have also voiced their objections.

Opposition leader Sajith Premadasa of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya has said that the proposed amendment to the constitution is a first step towards a dictatorship.

Meanwhile, member of the National People’s Power alliance, attorney-at-law Harshana Nanayakkara, has said that if the reforms are enacted, it will revert the country to a “Stone Age”.

“The entire amendment is made in a way where the Parliament is converted to just a rubber stamp as the powers of the House is taken by the President,” he said.

Recently released statistics report that HIV/AIDs might be on the rise in Sri Lanka. Here is a breakdown of what we know so far.  
#HIV #AIDs #lka

This is the first time this new PCR method — already in use in some countries — has been developed in Sri Lanka.

The first thing that you notice is the odour; a miasma of sea spray, sand, sweat, and sex. Wooden walls, asbestos sheet-roofed homes behind the railway station is where Mary\* has lived most her life since she moved to Colombo. And the discoloured mattress in this two-room space she calls home is where she entertains her clients.

Mary is a sex worker. Although her line of work is not a novelty, sex workers are among the most marginalised communities; deprived, exploited, persecuted and discriminated against.

Offering us the only two chairs in her home, Mary told us about the many times she was harassed by the police, despite the fact that she had committed no wrongdoing.

“There are so many instances, where I was minding my own business and the Police would come and arrest me,” she said. “I wasn’t even talking to a man. Once, I was arrested when I was going to get groceries.”

“I asked them why they would arrest me when I was not doing anything wrong. Isn’t it wrong to just arrest me when I have not committed a crime? Yes, I know I’m selling myself but at those particular moments, where is the crime?” she said.

In February, the Colombo Magistrate Ranga Dissanayake ruled that there are no provisions in the Penal Code of Sri Lanka to charge a sex worker. The Magistrate said the only way a person could be charged in the industry, is for maintaining a brothel or soliciting women as sex workers, also known as pimping.

Many saw the ruling at the time — even though it was from a lower-level court — as facilitation for sex worker rights and a breakthrough for lobbyists of the rights movement. It came after years of debates, battles fought against harassment of sex workers by law enforcement and those who procure their services.

Much of the country’s law surrounding prostitution dates back to the colonial rule; the Vagrants Ordinance (1842) and the Brothels Ordinance (1889). Neither of these laws has been amended in recent times.

Section 2 of the Vagrants Ordinance dictates that those who behave riotously or disorderly in public streets must be held liable to a fine not exceeding ‘five rupees’, while Section 3 (b) specifically identifies ‘idle and disorderly persons’ as ‘every common prostitute wandering the public street or highway, or in any place of public resort, and behaving in a riotous or indecent manner’.

Section 7 (1) (a) of the Vagrants Ordinance dictates that any person in a public place soliciting another for the purpose of the commission of any act of illicit sexual intercourse or indecency is guilty of an offence liable to imprisonment of a period not exceeding six months, or to a fine not exceeding Rs. 100 or both.

Mary cannot remember exactly when she was first arrested and charged with prostitution. However, she did recall what happened that day.

“The first time I was arrested was when I was working at a brothel in Nugegoda,” she said. “I didn’t know what was happening then. The Police came and told me to come with them. I figured out it was for this [prostitution]. I was fined Rs. 5,000.”

Leaving Mary at her home, we visit Mihiri\* (42) at her workplace. Mihiri has worked all her adult life at an ayurvedic spa, one of many on Marine Drive, Colombo.

It is common knowledge that many ‘spas’ or massage parlours act as a front for brothels.

“Spas are raided constantly by the police,” Mihiri told us. “Normally, what they do is send in a ‘deco’ — a decoy or an undercover police officer, usually in civilian attire — as a client. The ‘deco’ would ask if they could have sex with the girl who gives the massage.”

Mihiri’s workplace is strictly against this. “We do not allow the masseuse to have sex with the clients,” she said. But raids are conducted on the spa she works at even when the decoy Police officer fails to solicit intercourse from the women there.

“There really is no reason for them to raid and arrest us, especially when we are not doing anything wrong,” Mihiri said. “We are a licensed establishment. But they raid and arrest us to fill their quotas [the number of arrests a police officer is expected to make within a time frame],” Mihiri said.

As per the Brothel Ordinance No 05 of 1889, it is the person managing or assisting in the management of a brothel that is punishable by law.

Prasad Sanjeeva Gamage, the project coordinator of the Stand Up Movement, one of the many groups that lobby for sex workers’ rights in the country, explained that whenever women at a spa house are arrested and produced before a court, chances they will be acquitted and the manager of the establishment prosecuted under the Brothel Ordinance are higher.

“The main areas this happens is in Bambalapitiya, and the arrests are made by officers of Peliyagoda and Walana Anti-Corruption Police. If the spa house does not permit their masseuses to have sex with their clients, then the girls cannot be charged under the Brothel or Vagrants Ordinance. That is why the court acquits them,” he said.

Under general circumstances, police units must include a Women Police Constable to arrest women.

Despite this, the police continue to make wrongful arrests. “There were times when the police raided in the middle of the day, not even in their uniforms, [and] took us in. But they wouldn’t charge us until late that night. They would charge us saying we were arrested while we were out on the street. That is wrong,” Mihiri said.

“This is a problem that cannot be solved simply by passing laws that would decriminalise sex work,” Stand Up Movement’s Executive Director Ashila Dandeniya told Roar.

“What we seek is to establish a societal understanding of sex workers. If society continues to look down on these people, without any empathy and acceptance, there would not be any legal grounds for a decriminalisation procedure,” she said.

The justification for this argument is simple, according to Dandeniya; there is a large demand for commercial sex in the country and there is a corresponding supply of the service. However, social stigma has largely prevented acceptance and legalisation of this fact, leaving those in the industry —and those who procure services from them —vulnerable to all manner of ill-treatment.

Dandeniya is also of the opinion that if sex work is legalised at a time the country is not prepared to accept sex workers, there would be more problems for sex workers, worsening the existing challenges they face.

“When we were discussing this problem during one of the workshops, a sex worker herself brought up one of the issues. She inquired, ‘If a law is introduced, it will set a minimum price for a deal at a very small level like Rs. 50. How is that going to solve anything?’” Dandeniya said.

Whichever way, lobbyists believe the first and immediate need is to repeal outdated colonial legislature under which those sex workers are continually harassed. “We simply cannot have a law that restricts anyone’s — not just sex workers — basic human rights,” Dandeniya emphasised.

\*— Names have been changed to protect identities.

Cover photo credits: Roar Media/ Kris Thomas

Nearly 50 Sri Lankan migrant workers stranded in other countries have succumbed to the COVID-19 virus.

No one knew how old Lawrence was when he passed away. He died at the bus stop he took shelter at, amid rain or the unbearable noon heat. The bus stop in front of the construction site with the massive white Buddha statue next to it became his haven—where no one bothered him or asked him to leave.

V. A. M. T. Lawrence was homeless. He was one of many homeless people in Colombo, stranded and exposed to the elements, doubly vulnerable during the state-imposed COVID-19 curfew. He survived on whatever was given to him when begging in the Kirulapone area. But his ailments—he was asthmatic—made it difficult for him to walk long distances.

Lawrence had not always been homeless: he had a family back in Puttalam but had been stranded in Colombo during the government-mandated COVID-19 curfew that lasted almost two months.

And after two months on the street, Lawrence was found dead at the very bus stop he slept at.

“He [Lawrence] spoke and wrote English perfectly well. He told me that his daughter cared for him at his home in Puttalam," Christopher Dias, a resident of Kirulapone who had met and spoken to Lawrence prior to his demise, told Roar Media.

Dias said Lawrence had travelled from Puttalam to Colombo in March, right before the COVID-19 curfew was imposed. "He came to get his Employees' Provident Fund money sorted. But the curfew was imposed, and he got stuck here," Dias said.

"He didn't have a place to stay. He wanted to go to a homeless shelter, which we thought could be provided. But it didn't work out the way we planned," he added.

Care for homeless elders falls under the purview of the National Secretariat for Elders and the Department of Social Services. The Department manages 104 state-sponsored shelters in the Western Province that provide basic facilities for homeless elders, as well as assistance to procure necessary medicines and care. The Department also supports private shelters, which make up the majority of elders’ homes and shelters in the province.

But with the increased threat the COVID-19 outbreak poses to the elderly and senior citizens, the Department has now introduced a new policy.

"We will not provide shelter to anyone seeking such facilities without a PCR [polymerase chain reaction] test; this includes the homeless and the disabled community. We have decided to do so because of the high risk involved," Chandima Dissanayake, Director of the Social Service Department of the Western Province told Roar Media.

At present, government hospitals have prioritised conducting PCR tests on people suspected of COVID-19, or those who have shown symptoms of the virus—tests are not conducted on demand. In the case of private hospitals, a patient must be admitted prior to the test, which is estimated to cost a maximum of Rs. 6,000 per test.

These obstacles can only be circumvented if a social service officer intervenes—then a PCR test can be carried out at a government hospital free of charge. This process was available for private homeless shelters as well.

“The senior population and the disabled persons community are the most vulnerable to this disease. We don’t want to take unnecessary risks. If we take someone in without a PCR test, wouldn't we put the occupants at the shelter at risk? Who will take that responsibility?” Dissanayake asked.

According to her, there are two social service officers and the area’s Grama Sevaka office, who would intervene whenever an elderly homeless person was found on the road, seeking shelter. Through these officers, an individual can hope to find shelter.

Dissanayake said however that she was unaware of Lawrence’s predicament.

But Dias is unconvinced. “We contacted the social service officer of the area. He told us that Lawrence cannot be taken in without a PCR test. But these are homeless people. The area's social service officer, even after being contacted several times, didn't even bother to come visit Lawrence. And the Police refused to do anything either, saying that he may be infected [with COVID-19]. This is a pathetic situation!"

Lawrence reportedly passed away on 20 June. "The last I saw him, he looked dehydrated and the deterioration was very visible," Dias noted.

Those who knew of Lawrence tried to locate his family, to no avail.

At present, the province’s state-run shelters are at full capacity. According to Dissanayake, the most significant problem the Department of Social Services faces at this juncture is the lack of space and facilities.

“We cannot provide a bed to all those who come asking for it,” she said.

“Let’s assume a homeless senior citizen who enters a shelter at the age of sixty will live at the shelter under state care for at least thirty years. During that time, we cannot afford to bring in another occupant because we don’t have enough space,” Dissanayake said.

This very lack of available space may have resulted in another death of a homeless person.

Kali Muttu, 74, was working as a cobbler earlier this year, according to Keethika Augustine, another concerned citizen who had attempted to procure the services of the Department of Social Services, with no success.

"Kali Muttu's legs were paralysed. He was working as a cobbler but people used to steal from him because he was handicapped. He was also very sick," Augustine told Roar Media.

"On several occasions, we contacted the Department of Social Services, but they claimed they didn’t have the adequate resources to deal with Kali Muttu. They said he would have to look after himself. How could he do that? He's disabled," she said.

According to Augustine, Kali Muttu passed away in March, a few days before the COVID-19 lockdown was imposed, proving that the dilemma faced by the homeless is not unique to the pandemic, but is a pre-existing issue. The lack of a functioning system aimed at assisting the homeless was only exacerbated during the lockdown.

Sri Lanka currently does not maintain any statistics of homeless deaths that take place in the country. Their deaths are recorded as unclaimed/unidentified cadavers by the relevant authorities and they are buried in unmarked graves in a public cemetery.

With the current pandemic, the existing ad-hoc system of dealing with the destitute risks more homeless deaths that go unrecorded and ultimately, are discarded disgracefully.

At the height of the COVID-19 lockdown, over 300 homeless people were removed from the Gunasinghepura area in Colombo 12, after a Covid-19 patient was discovered there. They were relocated to various quarantine centres where they were subjected to PCR tests. Many tested negative for COVID-19 and were released after the mandatory two weeks of quarantine.

However, the question remained as to whether they would return to the same locale. According to Dissanayake, the solution was to transfer them to state-run shelters or private shelters for the homeless, based on availability of space.

Ad-hoc quick fixes such as these measures taken by state authorities and institutions only provide temporary solutions. The 300 individuals from Gunasinghepura—if transferred to shelters as said—were undeniably the lucky ones out of the many homeless who struggled (and in all likelihood, continue to struggle) during these trying times.

Lawrence and Kali Mutti were not among the lucky. They fell victim to an ineffective and under-resourced government programme, their deaths not gracing the footnotes of history.

Cover: Christopher Dias and Roar Media/Jamie Alphonsus

Leader of the United National Party (UNP), Ranil Wickremesinghe, has resigned after the devastating defeat of the party at the Parliamentary Election last week.

Wickremesinghe, who led the ‘Grand Old Party’ for over 26 years, resigned after facing the biggest setback in the party’s history at the 2020 Parliamentary election, where the UNP failed to secure even 3% of the overall vote and only obtained one seat through the National List.

The decision to step down as the leader of the party was announced earlier today (10) after the party's Central Working Committee met at Sirikotha, the party headquarters.

UNP General Secretary Akila Viraj Kariyawasam said Wickremesinghe had decided to step down and that the party had nominated the names of those who could replace him as leader.

"We believe we can restructure the party and think about the future," the former MP said.

UNP heavyweights Ravi Karunanayake, Daya Gamage, Vajira Abeywardena and Akila Viraj Kariyawasam have been nominated by the party for the position, Kariyawasam said.

He said the Central Working Committee of the party would decide on Wednesday (12) who the new UNP leader would be.

The UNP is also set to announce who will take up the one seat it received through the National List this week.

Amidst calls for Wickremesinghe to resign, the UNP issued a statement that acknowledged its defeat but drew attention to its achievements.

“The UNP has encountered the greatest setback in its history,” it read, “despite many achievements which brought long-lasting benefits to the country and the people.”

“As a party we faced many challenges internally as well as externally. The UNP is prepared to accept the responsibility for failure and shortcomings, both the results of its own actions and the actions of others.”

It added that the party will be reorganised and restructured to face challenges and would move forward with ‘determination and vigour.’

Wickremesinghe has long been blamed for the downfall of the UNP, many accusing him of being a ‘dictator’ within his own party, refusing to step down after more than 29 defeats at Presidential, Parliamentary and other elections, and neglecting to cultivate new leadership.

Things came to a head at the Presidential election last year, when the UNP’s Deputy Leader, former President Ranasinghe Premadasa’s son Sajith Premadasa fought to replace Wickremesinghe as the party’s nominee for the election.

Premadasa was allowed to, but Wickremesinghe held onto the leadership of the party. Amidst increasing discontent from many party members, a breakaway faction—the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) —was formed under the leadership of Sajith Premadasa.

Many long-time UNP members switched allegiances and the recently concluded Parliamentary Election has cemented the decline of the UNP.

While the Rajapaksa-led Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) gained an easy majority at the election—with 6,853,693 with 145—the SJB came in second with 2,771,984 votes and 54 seats, followed by the Jathika Jana Balawegaya (JJB) with 445,958 votes and 10 seats , the Illankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi (ITAK) with 327,168 and 10 seat and the UNP with just 2.15% of the total valid votes polled.

Editorial note - Despite UNP General Secretary Akila Viraj Kariyawasam announcing Wickremesinghe would step down, Wickresinghe has not yet officially moved beyond recognising the need for a new leader.

Tomorrow (August 5), Sri Lankans will be voting in its ninth parliament. The 225 members voted in will possess legislative supremacy over all other political institutions in the island, with the power to make, repeal, and amend laws, including the Constitution.

But how does this parliamentary process work and how are the 225 members chosen?

The legal basis for the parliamentary, or general election is set out in the 1978 Constitution, as well as the Parliament Elections Act No. 01 of 1981—among other legal provisions, circulars, and guidelines.

It is the 1978 Constitution, or the Second Republican Constitution, that sets out that 225 members must be ‘returned’ to parliament as elected members from the electoral districts in Sri Lanka.

While Sri Lanka has 25 administrative districts, it has only 22 electoral districts; this is the result of the electoral district of Jaffna covering the administrative districts of Jaffna and Kilinochchi and the electoral district of Vanni consisting of the administrative districts of Mannar, Mullaitivu and Vavuniya.

According to the 1978 Constitution, four seats of the 225 seats reserved for the 225 parliament members are apportioned to each of the nine provinces of Sri Lanka right at the start of the process.

“This is so that no province is under-represented,” Aaseem Mohamed, an analyst at Verité Research explained to Roar Media.

“For example, take the Trincomalee district,” he said. “It is slightly underpopulated but has a relatively large land area. A district should be properly represented, and sometimes, if you only consider the population, that district may just get a few seats.”

To avoid this, the Delimitation Commission decides how best to divide the four seats given to each province, among its existing districts.

For example, the Western Province has three electoral districts; Colombo, Gampaha and Kalutara. The Delimitation Commission will allocate the four seats assigned to the Western Province to each of these three districts by taking into account several factors.

The four seats per province, that is apportioned to each district on the recommendation of the Delimitation Committee removes 36 seats from the 225 to be ‘returned’ to parliament, leaving 189 to be accounted for.

Of the 189, 29 seats are allocated to what is known as the ‘National List’. This ultimately leaves only 160 seats to be ‘returned’ to parliament through universal adult franchise from across the island (more on this, further down).

These remaining 160 ‘members to be returned’ as Members of Parliament (MPs) are decided in a rather complex way.

First, the Election Commission (EC) must decide how many seats or candidates are to be returned from each district. This depends largely on the voter population of that district.

“Before they call for nominations, the EC will publish the number of ‘members to be returned’ from each electoral district,” Mohamed said.

“The EC will, according to Article 98 of the Constitution, decide the number of seats, [some of which are] based on the number of voters [in that district] and sometimes vary from the previous one. If you take Badulla, last time it was eight, this time it is nine. Likewise for Galle, last time it was 10, this time it is nine.”

Once the EC publishes the number of seats to be ‘returned’ per electoral district, it will call for nominations.

Each political party or group must nominate the number of members that correspond to the number of seats allocated to the district, plus an additional three members.

For example, this year, the Colombo district is entitled to 19 seats in Parliament. Therefore, each party will nominate 19 candidates for the Colombo district plus three additional candidates to make up 22. “This additional three is in case someone passes away, falls severely ill or the seat has to be revoked for any other reason—then the other person on the list can replace them,” Mohamed said.

In addition to recognised political parties, the election usually sees a number of independent groups contesting. This year alone, Colombo has 26 independent groups contesting with more than 20 nominees per group, amounting to over 500 independent candidates.

Mohamed explained that since registering a political party is a process and takes up time, many choose to run independently within their own districts.

“You may be popular within the district but may not have the luxury to run [for an election] in multiple districts. Then, you can contest as an independent group and run within a district,” Mohamed said, explaining that registered parties contested in more than one district.

On election day, when voters make their way to respective polling divisions, they will be presented with a ballot paper. They must first vote for a party or group of choice and then, additionally, mark preferential votes for upto three candidates from within the party of their choice.

For a clearer idea on how to vote, as well other matters you should bear in mind, like what identification documentation is accepted, or what new measures have been introduced as a result of concerns surrounding COVID-19, view this video we’ve created below.

This year’s voting process includes several more procedures in order to maintain health and safety standards as a precaution against COVID-19. Video Credits: Roar Media

After the polls close tomorrow (August 5) the ballot boxes will be kept under safe conditions overnight this year, as a result of COVID-19 concerns, before counting begins at 8 AM the next day (August 6). Usually, counting takes place on the night of the election.

On August 6, the EC will first begin to release the party results from the 160 polling divisions which make up the 22 electoral districts. This will tell us how each of the parties and independent groups are faring in each of the polling divisions.

Later, as counting progresses, the EC will begin to release party results from the districts, which will tell us which of the parties are taking the lead and how the others are faring. Following the formula highlighted below, the EC will also calculate how many of the available seats in each of the districts are won by each party.

Article 99(6)(a) of the Constitution mandates that only parties or groups that receive more than 1/20th of the total votes polled—in other words, over five percent of total votes—in any district will qualify to even be considered for a parliament seat. Therefore, every party or group that does not pass this five percent threshold is automatically disqualified, leaving only the parties or groups that have qualified in the fray.

Another thing to remember, is that Article 99(5) of the Constitution also mandates that whichever party receives the most votes for any particular district automatically secures one seat, commonly referred to as a ‘bonus seat’.

Here’s how the seats are apportioned.

Once the EC has announced how many seats had been won by each party based on the calculation above, it will announce which of the candidates received the most preferential votes in each of the districts. The candidate with the highest preferential vote will automatically receive the ‘bonus seat’, while the remainder of the seats will go to the candidates that amassed the most number of votes.

After the island-wide results—both party and candidates—are announced, each party will announce who will enter parliament through the 29 seats available on the National List.

The National List was first introduced as a method to enable professionals, academics, and experts in various fields to enter parliament without being disadvantaged by their lack of constituencies or networks.

For example, in 1994, then lawyer, the late Lakshman Kadirgamar entered politics for the first time through the National List and subsequently was appointed Foreign Minister. Similarly, in 2010 former MP Eran Wickramaratne too, left his banking career of nearly 30 years to enter politics through the National List.

“The National List doesn’t fall under a district but goes straight to Parliament,” Mohamed explained. While a party or independent group can nominate up to 29 members to the National List—although in many cases it is far less—how many National List nominees each political party or independent group is allowed to send to parliament is decided on the overall number of votes their party or independent group receives at the election.

Since those on the National List are not contesting, voters cannot indicate preference for who should enter parliament through the list—this is at the discretion of the party. But, while there has been praise for the National List in theory, in practice most parties simply elect the candidates that were rejected after contesting at district-level. Since in Sri Lanka, nominations for the National List are put forward in what is called an ‘open list’, which allows for parties or groups to change the names put forward even after the election, it facilitates the ‘backdoor entrance’ of those who fail to be elected to Parliament. This has called for reform of a method that was meant to draw those with professional and academic experience into parliament.

This parliamentary electoral process we have explained falls under an electoral system known as ‘Proportional Representation’ (PR). Sri Lanka previously used the First-Past-The-Post electoral system (FPP) which was less representative than the current PR system.

“But there is also criticism for the [current] PR system,” Mohamed said. “Earlier, if a candidate was contesting from, let’s say Moratuwa, under the FPP system the candidate only had to campaign within Moratuwa. Under PR, the candidate needs to campaign for the whole of Colombo. So now, the candidate has to pump in a lot more funds in an effort to secure more votes.”

There is also criticism that the PR system is more favourable to the larger political parties, as the five percent threshold to qualify for seats in parliament means that it is the parties with existing large networks that have a higher chance of qualifying.

The absence of sound campaign finance laws, in addition to these, means that changing the current electoral system alone is not going to solve the problem, Mohamed explained, adding, “but, we shouldn’t go back from the PR to a FPP system. We should always aim to keep moving to a more representative system. Several countries have also adopted their own ‘mixed’ electoral systems.”

General elections are just as important as Presidential elections. They determine which party will have the majority in the House, and has a bearing on some key decisions the legislature—that is the 225 members of parliament—may choose to make.

For this reason, voter awareness and citizen participation in politics and civic life are integral to a functioning democracy. As such, pondering the inner machinations of the general election is important as we move into the voting, counting, and soon, the appointing of a brand new parliament that will sit until its term expires in 2025. (Article 70(1) of the Constitution explains the occasions this does not apply).

We hope this article helped you understand the importance of voting at the election tomorrow, so you are truly able to make your vote count.

Cover: AFP.

Design and Editing: Jamie Alphonsus

India and China have continued to jostle with each in trying to take the lead in development and infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka.

Over the weekend, two new investments were announced by both regional superpowers: India has proposed a solar power park while China secured a deal to introduce a smart card system for train stations in Sri Lanka.

Both investments have piqued general interest and debate since announcement.

It was in February that the Ministry of Transport Management first announced a smart card for quick train travel and an e-ticketing system for seat reservations would be introduced in the near future.

Now, five months since, the contract for the project has been granted to a Chinese firm.

The e-ticketing system is expected to enable local and foreign tourists book tickets more efficiently, and to also eliminate the chance of selling tickets at higher prices by third parties.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) is collaborating with the government to set up the e-ticketing system, the Ministry of Transport Management said.

The decision to grant the contract to a Chinese firm, however, has been met with some resistance. Sanjiva Weerawarana, former board member of the Information and Communication Technology Agency (ICTA) tweeted:

Meanwhile, India’s livemint reported that India had agreed to set up a solar power park in Sri Lanka.

Quoting anonymous sources, the report suggests that NTPC Ltd—one of India's largest power generation utility companies—plans to commence work on the project under the supervision of International Solar Alliance (ISA).

The ISA is an alliance of 121 countries, led by India. It is the result of a 2015 proposal by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to endorse clean energy, sustainable environment, public transport and climate. Sri Lanka is a signatory and has ratified the framework of the ISA.

According to the livemint report, the proposed solar park comes on the heels of NTPC Ltd’s 2011 plan to establish a coal power plant project in Trincomalee, which was eventually scrapped.

The company has established similar projects in Gambia and Malawi to develop solar power parks.

China has been the largest investor in Sri Lanka, with funding and investments surpassing USD 15 billion since the end of the civil war in 2009. The country's flagship projects are the Hambantota Port Development and the Colombo Port City Project, both strategically located on the global sea trade routes classified as integral investments under China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

India’s relationship with Sri Lanka has, in comparison, been far softer. It's roots are founded in bilateral economic links and trade agreements. In 2018, Sri Lanka owed China $5 billion while it owes India about $960 million.

The competition between China and India is not new. The cold war between the two even transitioned to open skirmishes early this year, when the two countries opened fire on the opposing forces in Ladakh.

As Sri Lanka continues to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic that has overshadowed 2020, the recurring threat of dengue is still very prevalent. This mosquito-borne disease, which was first detected in Sri Lanka in the 1960s, continues to be a major public health issue—with high morbidity, high mortality and no approved vaccination in the country, it has and continues to be difficult to eradicate.

In May this year, health officials warned of a possible surge in cases with the onset of the south-west monsoon. With resources, energy, and attention focused on COVID-19, negligence about a virus that can breed in your backyard was highly likely. And as experts confirm, dengue numbers continue to be reported against the backdrop of COVID-19.

The novel coronavirus, COVID-19 caused consternation as it began to spread across the world: here was an airborne, unseen, untested and unfamiliar virus, to which there was no known solution. A vaccination for COVID-19 is yet to be developed, and cases and deaths continue, now more than six months after the virus was first detected in China.

Sri Lanka, which has been lauded for successfully managing the virus, responded quickly by appointing a national action committee and screening inbound passengers at airports and ports after the first patient was detected in January. It was only in March that the second case was discovered, giving way to over 2, 000 cases as of the end of June 2020.

But while the nation’s attention was focused on the ‘unseen’ enemy, a more familiar threat continued alongside. By the end of June, there were 22, 469 dengue cases recorded—over ten times more than the number of COVID-19 cases— and 26 deaths compared to the 11 attributed to the novel coronavirus.

More than half these—11,595 cases—were recorded in January, Dr Onali Rajapakshe, Acting Consultant and Community Physician of the National Dengue Control Unit, told Roar Media.

“There are certain factors that affect the spread of dengue, such as rainfall, temperature, and humidity,” Dr Rajapakshe said, explaining that the surge of cases in January was due to heavy rain in the latter part of last year, and the early part of this year. Dengue cases usually peak between June-August and at the end of the year, corresponding with the heavy rainfall brought in by the south-west and north-east monsoons.

There were some marked differences noted this year, however, Dr Rajapakshe said, explaining, “so far the total number of cases is just over 22,000. If you look at the other years for the same duration of time, this year is better.”

Dengue cases over each year between 2016-2020. Although the year began with a large number of dengue cases in January, the cases for the rest of the year were relatively low.

She said it was possible the curfew imposed as a result of COVID-19 may have helped mitigate the spread of the dengue: “People were restricted to their homes, and had time to clean up. Also, restricted travelling played a big part,” she said.

Urbanisation is also, typically, a major contributor to dengue: “Usually, when we see an increased number of patients in Colombo, we see an increase in other areas also. This is because temporary workers who come from other areas then travel back home,” Dr Rajapakshe pointed out. But the months-long COVID-19 curfew acted as a deterrent to that.

While dengue cases are distributed across the island, Colombo has reported the most with 3,105 confirmed cases (at the time of writing). This is a trend that has been observed over the past ten years, Dr Rajapakshe said.

“The risk [of dengue] is based on several factors such as population density, mosquito distribution, presence of potential breeding sites etc., and there is a higher risk in urban areas,” Dr Rajapakshe said.

The viral infection is transmitted through the bite of an infected Aedes aegypti or Aedes albopictus mosquito which usually bites two hours after sunrise and before sunset. While there is no human-to-human transmission, there is instead a human-to-mosquito-to-human transmission cycle, where an infected patient can infect an uninfected mosquito.

With mosquito life-cycles related to clearwater, she further emphasised the need to remove water collecting items and eradicate breeding grounds found in construction sites—an industry that is largely contributing to rising cases.

Dr Rajapakshe said that having acknowledged the difficulty with removing water from such large sites, the Registrar of Pesticides had granted approval to use licensed pesticides. She confirmed that the National Dengue Control Unit has and continues to work with this industry, on awareness and communication of appropriate control measures.

Most recently, the Unit, during their recent eradication programmes detected 22 percent of construction sites across the country as dengue breeding grounds and subsequently took legal action against these sites.

Over the years, the country has experienced a consistent trend of dengue cases, withDr Rajapakshe adding that usually, 30% of the cases were school and pre-school children.

Although a dengue vaccine ‘Dengvaxia’ has been put forward globally, with mixed results, it has not been approved by Sri Lankan authorities. As a result, the main focus is on prevention, by limiting opportunities for mosquitoes to breed and taking measures to avoid being bitten.

“The main challenge is getting the public to act on this,” Dr Rajapakshe said. “We have to clean and keep our environment free of breeding grounds. This does not mean only in our houses, but also institutions, construction sites, religious places, public places.”

The Unit has continued to undertake its prevention and control efforts and currently monitors the ‘DengueFreeChildApp’, developed in collaboration with several stakeholders. Through this app teachers and parents can report a confirmed or suspected case of dengue, so that necessary action can be taken and infection-prone areas identified.

The Unit is also working with the World Mosquito Program on the ‘Wolbachia Project’ which uses the ‘Wolbachia bacteria’ to inhibit the spread of dengue among mosquitos, and is being trialled in certain areas in Sri Lanka. This method, first implemented in Australia—where no transmissions have been recorded in eight years—has been set up in 12 other countries.

“But we need help from the public as we cannot solve this issue by ourselves,” Dr Rajapakshe said. She highlighted the need to remove breeding places and maintain efficient waste disposal. With regards to children she said that precautions must be taken when allowing children to play outside, applying repellents or covering their bodies to minimise mosquito bites.

“Also, during the lockdown people were at home and regular clean-ups at institutions and other places would not have been taking place. It is important when going back, especially schools, to undertake clean-up programmes before the students return,” she said.

While there is no significant spike in dengue cases this year, it bears reminding this deadly virus exists and must be battled alongside COVID-19.

Efficient and accurate diagnosis of dengue is of primary importance, and early detection is key. But Dr Rajapakshe said that as fever is a symptom common to both dengue and COVID-19, it was possible that some may have been reluctant to seek healthcare during the curfew. There was also the fear that one may contract COVID-19 during a visit to the hospital—however, she said, appropriate precautionary measures have been adopted in hospitals so there was no need for the public to be afraid of seeking treatment.

With the current monsoon and the usual trend of dengue numbers rising during July and August, it is possible that the cases will rise during the upcoming months. But, Chief Epidemiologist Dr Sudath Samaraweera told Roar Media, “just because there is one disease, does not mean we will not focus on the others. We will work parallelly to address all of the problems.”

Note -

A clinical-dengue like illness has been recorded in Sri Lanka from the early 20th century, but was serologically confirmed in 1962.

All data was collected and updated as at 14 June 2020.

Cover: Roar Media/Jamie Alphonsus

Roar Media prides itself on producing original, refreshing, and thought provoking content which aims to capture the vibrancy of the South Asian region.

The Cabinet of Ministers met on Wednesday (22), to make several key government decisions.

The decisions were announced by co-Cabinet spokespersons Ministers Bandula Gunawardana and Ramesh Pathirana at the weekly press briefing held today (23).

Here are some of the decisions made:

Beautification and Landscape Development Projects in Colombo and Sri Jayawardenapura  
  
A proposal by the Ministry of Urban Development, Water Supply and Housing Facilities to implement three landscape development projects in Colombo and the Sri Jayawardenapura town has been approved by the Cabinet.  
  
The three projects include a green infrastructure network plan around the Galle Face beach strip, a pedestrian centre on Baladaksha Mawatha, Colombo and an Urban Agriculture Park in Kimbulawala, Thalapathpitiya.  
  
The three projects that will be carried out by the Urban Development Authority (UDA).

Expansion of benefits of Agrahara Insurance Scheme for Retired Public Officers  
  
The Agrahara Insurance Scheme for Retired Public Officers, upon request from Retirement Associations of the country, will now include pensioners who retired from public service before January 16, 2016.  
  
The proposal for the amendment came from the Ministry of Skills Development, Employment and Labour Relations and the Ministry of Public Administration, Home Affairs, Provincial Councils and Local Governments.  
  
Accordingly, the pensioners will receive the benefit of a special ward in all major government hospitals.  
  
The Cabinet has also identified pension anomalies among the retirees and has requested the National Salaries and Remuneration Commission to make appropriate recommendations to rectify these anomalies.

Click here to read more about the decisions arrived at by the Cabinet.

News that ethnicity would no longer be listed on a child’s birth certificate has been rejected as untrue by the Registrar General’s Department, even as it confirmed it would go ahead with plans to drop parent’s marital information.

Registrar General N. C. Vithanage, speaking to Roar Media today (23) said plans to modernise the birth certificate did not include the removal of a child’s ethnicity.

“References to race or ethnicity, be it Sinhala, Tamil or any of the minorities, will continue to be included in the birth certificate,” he said. “The old birth certificate as well as the new one—when it comes into being—will include the race and ethnicity of the child.”

On Wednesday (22), both local and international media, quoting Vithanage, reported that Sri Lanka was to do away with race and religion, in addition to the previously reported information on parent’s marital status.

The reports further suggested that all new birth certificates will categorise newly-born children uniformly as ‘Sri Lankan’.

While this was met with positivity on social media, former Sri Lanka cricket captain Mahela Jayawardene tweeting his support:

and former Minister Harin Fernando tweeting,

Minister Wimal Weerawansa, however, led the charge against the move, telling those gathered at a political rally last night, “those changes will not happen under this leadership.”

“I read on social media that the Registrar-General had told the media that race and religion would not be mentioned in birth certificates in the future,” he said.

“I was astonished to see that. I told it to the Prime Minister and he advised the Ministry Secretary of Public Administration to immediately correct it. I [even] told the President also that there is such a move.”

References to religion are not included in the current birth certificate, and will not be included in the new one, Vithanage said.

“It is unnecessary to include one's religion in the birth certificate.”

Although he is unsure about the source of the misinformation, he suspects the news may have been distorted to gain political mileage.

“Even the Bodu Bala Sena and Ravana Balakaya visited the Department today (23) to obtain a clarification on this matter,” he said. “When explained about the true proposal, they were also satisfied.”

Vithanage also noted the new birth certificate is yet to be finalised.

“This is still a proposal which is yet to gain approval from many authorities. We will seek public opinion on the matter and refer it to the Parliament for approval. It has to be approved by the Cabinet as well as the Attorney General,” he said.

The proposal to transition from a handwritten format for the birth certificate—which is the current practice—to a more modern, digitised one has been in the pipeline since last year.

“The new digital birth certificate will be a more secure document that cannot be forged,” Vithanage explained.

Some of the new additions to the new birth certificate include:

The biggest change would be the omission of the parent’s marital information.

“This is an issue many children face, especially when a child is to be enrolled in a school. They could be orphans or children of a single parent,” Vithanage said.

“This has been requested by many groups for so many years.”

There is no historical record of the existence of a civil registration system during the rule of native kings or the Portuguese.

Under the Dutch rule however, a system was introduced known as the ‘School Thombos’ or parish registers in Colombo and Galle. The purpose of the Thombos was to keep record and legitimise conversion of families.

Even under British rule, the country did not have a formalised civil registration system until 1867. It was only then, that the Registrar General’s Department, under Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam, founded a formalised system for the registration of births, marriages and deaths.

As many as 483,172 people have lost their jobs during the first quarter of this year, due to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Department of Census and Statistics released its latest report on the Labour Force Survey which identifies that the current unemployment rate is at 5.7 percent—an all time high, in years.

In economics, the unemployment rate is defined as the proportion of the unemployed population to the total labour force.

In 2019, the country's unemployment rate was recorded at 4.8 percent, ranking it third among South Asian countries with high unemployment rates.

Data released by the Department indicated that the unemployment rate was at its lowest (of 4 percent) in the fourth quarter of 2011 and largely remained under 5 percent for most of the decade.

The country has not seen this level of high unemployment since the end of the 30-year war in 2009. That year, the unemployment rate spiked a staggering 6 percent, available data indicated. However, the end of the war saw a boom in development and construction in the country.

The country also saw an injection of investments, funded partially by foreign funds, that increased labour demand. As a result, the economy witnessed a gradual drop in the unemployment rate.

The COVID-19 crisis is seen as the biggest factor in the rise of unemployment this year. In addition to affecting several key sectors/industries, it caused a drop in the largest income generator in the country: tourism, when the airport shut down in March and islandwide curfew ensued.

Read the full report released by the Department of Census and Statistics here.

The country’s largest COVID-19 patient cluster came to an end with the last three patients from the Sri Lanka Navy being discharged from hospital yesterday (20).

According to the Navy Spokesperson Captain Indika De Silva, all 906 navy personnel who contracted the virus at the Welisara Navy Base have regained health.

On April 22, a Navy officer attached to the Welisara Navy Base was tested positive for COVID-19, after he was admitted to the Welikanda Hospital with symptoms of the virus.

As a result, officers who shared living quarters with him and those he came into contact with were placed under quarantine and subject to PCR testing.

But more cases began to be reported from the Welisara Navy Camp sparking the onset of a new patient cluster. The highest number of patients to be recorded in a single day for the month of April—65 patients on April 27—were from the Navy cluster.

Health authorities investigating the origin of the cluster traced it back to a Navy officer involved in the arrest of a number of people evading quarantine in Suduwella, Ja-Ela, where earlier in April, another major patient cluster was identified.

With the discovery of the cluster, the Welisara Navy Base was declared an isolated area on April 23 as a precautionary measure against the spread of the virus. It was only after two months—on June 23—that the authorities declared the Welisara Navy Camp safe to re-open.

The Welisara Navy Hospital, which was used exclusively to treat infected navy personnel, was only re-opened on July 10, after 77-days of isolation.

Read more about our coverage on how Sri Lanka fared during the first five months of the COVID-19 pandemic here.

Despite calls to postpone the Parliamentary elections after a sudden spike in COVID-19 cases with the discovery of a new cluster and fears of community spread of the virus, indications are that the elections will go ahead as planned on August 5.

The government announced this morning health guidelines that were issued on June 1 to minimise the spread of COVID-19 during the upcoming election period would be gazetted in the next two days.

Addressing a media at Temple Trees alongside Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa today (16),Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi said the health guidelines would be gazetted after necessary advice and approval was obtained from the Attorney General and the Legal Draftsman.

The announcement came on the heels of criticism from the Chairperson of the National Elections Commission (NEC), Mahinda Deshapriya, who on Wednesday (15) pointed out that the delay in gazetting the health guidelines was proving a major obstacle to the polls.

Deshapriya said the Commission was determined to go ahead with the election, as long as the election did not serve as a vector for new COVID-19 cases in the country, but that it was unrealistic to expect the public to adhere to health guidelines when public officials dismissed them.

He was referring to an incident in which an Agriculture Sector Officer in the North-Western Province had ignored health guidelines during postal voting.

The NEC also announced that August 4 would be a ‘special day’ set aside for those in quarantine to make their postal votes.

This will include those who tested positive for the virus after the detection of the new COVID-19 cluster linked to the Kandakadu Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre, and the possible new cases that might be detected in the coming days.

Today is the fourth day of postal voting for the 2020 General Election, which began on Monday (13), with the staff members at the offices of Medical Officers of Health (MOH) casting their absentee votes from 9.00 am to 4.00 pm.

Members of security forces, the Police, the Civil Security Department, health sector workers, staff of District Secretariats, and election offices cast their postal votes from 9.00 am to 4.00 pm today (16) and also between 9.00 am to 2.00 pm tomorrow (17).

A surge of new cases from outside quarantine centres today (14) have caused concern there may be a community spread of COVID-19, even as authorities continue to reassure the public the situation is under control.

“If there are cases found among the public, we will let you know,” Health Services Director General Dr Anil Jasinghe told the media.

Despite the assurances, a private hospital in Ragama was temporarily closed after the General Manager there tested positive for COVID-19. The General Manager had served as a consultant at the Kandakadu Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre prior to taking on the role of General Manager on July 1.

Forty-eight staffers who had come into contact with the patient were placed in self-quarantine and have also been subject to polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests, the results of which are soon expected.

At least 30 people from seven families in Homagama were also placed in self-quarantine today, after two Army personnel from the area tested positive for COVID-19 on Monday (13).

The two officers who are from Kendalanda and Godagama areas in Homagama, are employed at the Kandakadu Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre which is proving to be a vector for the latest cluster.

Two more COVID-19 cases were identified in two separate areas of the Gampaha district today: one, a staffer at the Kandakadu Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre and the other, a driver who transported the staffer to the Centre.

Complicating matters further, the driver had reportedly appeared as a witness at the Gampaha Magistrates’ Court on Tuesday, July 07, which will mean that all those present in court that day and their contacts will have to be traced and tested.

The Mobitel office at W. A. D. Ramanayake Mawatha, Colombo 2 was also forced closed after a person who was possibly exposed to COVID-19 visited the bank.

“As suspicion arose of a person who has associated with another person who in turn had exposure to a COVID 19 patient (third circle) had visited the W.A.D Ramanayake Mawatha branch, Colombo 02, we have taken necessary actions and have temporarily closed the branch for complete disinfection as a precautionary measure,” Mobitel said in a statement.

Later during the day, the Kilinochchi Campus of the Jaffna University was also shut down, after the brother of a student from the university—an Army officer deployed at the Kandakadu Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre—tested positive for the virus.

This very latest, unexpected cluster that has emerged from Kandakadu Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre continues to grow with each passing day. At the time of writing, 519 patients have been identified from the cluster, within a time frame of six days.

Meanwhile, responding to the cases reported from various parts of the island today, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa assured the public that he would protect them from the virus.

He also instructed officials to continue to take PCR tests to contain the spread of the virus.

The Government Information Department and the Health Promotion Bureau have both stepped up efforts to educate the public on health and safety measures they should be adhering to, while the President’s Media Division issued a notice reminding all public and private institution heads that the responsibility to ensure health guidelines are adhered to lay with them.

For another article related to this latest outbreak, click here. Click on this to learn more about how Sri Lanka fared during the first five months of the COVID-19 pandemic and for Roar’s overall coverage of the pandemic, click here.

The Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) has increased the number of random polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests carried out in the Colombo city, following the discovery of the recent cluster of patients at the Kandakadu Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre.

Dr Ruwan Wijeyamuni, the Chief Medical Officer at the CMC told Roar Media,

“We were doing about 100-150 a day initially but we scaled-down when fewer cases were being reported. It came down to around 30 PCR tests a day. But we have raised it to around 60 right now."

Dr Wijeyamuni said around 60 samples were collected from random PCR tests that were carried out in Mattakkuliya earlier today.

The CMC is currently focusing PCR tests on identified high-risk groups which include bus drivers, bus conductors, three-wheeler drivers, delivery drivers and labourers (nattami).

Dr Wijeyamuni also responded to several unverified news reports that were circulating on social media earlier today that suggested that parts of Pettah have been isolated due to an identification of a COVID-19 patient.

"A nattami who had been to the Kandakadu Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre had been released recently, after serving his jail sentence and completing the rehabilitation period. The CMC was informed of this and was tasked with finding him. We found him and sent him back to Kandakadu for a PCR test. It was a precautionary measure. The area was not shut down for any reason," he explained.

This is a live blog about the novel coronavirus now named COVID-19, that is spreading rapidly across the world. The latest developments, from both here and abroad, will be documented here.

Saturday, July 19

22:43 Twenty new COVID-19 cases reported so far today; nine returnees from Saudi Arabia, seven from Qatar, India and the UAE. Four contacts from the Kandakadu Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre.

Friday, July 17

18:00 Global COVID-19 death toll surpasses 600,000. More than 14.2 million people infected while 8.4 million have recovered.

18:55 Six new COVID-19 cases reported so far today; five are contacts of the Kandakadu Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre, one returnee from the Philippines.

Thursday, July 16

08:56 Army Commander Lt. General Shavendra Silva says all those who visited detainees at the Kandakadu Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre have tested negative for COVID-19.

11:57 Public Health Inspectors Union of Sri Lanka says its members will step away from all COVID-19 control duties with effect from today.

12:25 Attorney General approves COVID-19 (Election) Regulations 2020 submitted by the Health Ministry Secretary, pertaining only to Election meetings, canvassing and election offices.

18:24 139 individuals subjected to PCR tests in Rajanganaya; out of which only one—a 12-year-old youth—tested positive for the virus.

14:51 Education Ministry announces that schools will re-open on July 27 only for Grades 11, 12 and 13. The new examination dates for GCE Advanced Level and Grade Five Scholarship examinations will be announced on Monday (20). Meanwhile, schools in Rajanganaya and Welikanda will remain closed until August 10.

Wednesday, July 15

09:48 Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, addressing the country, claims that the public need not have unnecessary fear with regards to the community spread of COVID-1913:28 Six COVID-19 recoveries reported; the total number of recoveries now at 2007

17:40 Eight new COVID-19 cases reported so far today; all new cases are from relatives of individuals attached to the Kandakadu Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre.

Tuesday, July 14

07:18 COVID-19 positive patients identified from the Kandakadu Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre increases to 519; nearly 800 persons under quarantine.

12:30 Melsta Private Hospital in Ragama temporarily shut down after its General Manager test positive for COVID-19

13:00 At least 30 people from seven families in Homagama were placed in self-quarantine after two Army personnel from the area tested positive for COVID-19.

18:00 The Mobitel office at W. A. D. Ramanayake Mawatha, Colombo 2 temporarily closed down after a person who was exposed to the virus visited the premises.

18:29 Two COVID-19 cases reported from Kundasale.

19:42 Two more COVID-19 patients identified in Gampaha.

Monday, July 13

17:52 Movement in several areas in Rajanganaya suspended by authorities, after several COVID-19 cases have been identified.

19:10 506 COVID-19 cases reported from the Kandakadu Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre so far; out of which 429 are detainees, 47 staffers and 30 contacts.

19:23 Twenty-five (25) COVID-19 cases reported so far today; 11 from Senapura Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre and14 from Kandakadu Rehabilitation Centre.

Sunday, July 12

10:38 Government Information Department refutes rumours of a possible government holiday due to the surge of COVID-19 cases.

19:10 Ministry of Education announces an additional holiday for all government schools and piriven institutions from 13-17 July.

21:35 All Catholic Private schools will follow government decision to close schools from tomorrow until 17 July.

21:59 National Election Commission announced that postal voting for the Rajanganaya Divisional Secretariat has been postponed due to the number of COVID-19 cases that were identified from the area.

Saturday, July 11

14:43 A second counsellor attached to the Kandakadu Treatment and Rehabilitation Center living in Rajanganaya, tested positive for COVID-19. Over 300 contacts including 70 children have been asked to self-quarantine.

22:58 Four more cases reported in the Rajanganaya area; all contacts of the counsellor who tested positive for the disease earlier today.

23:50 Fifty-seven (57) new COVID-19 cases identified so far today.

Friday, July 10

07:40 The Sri Lanka Army reports the quarantine centre in Kandakadu converted into a hospital to provide treatment to COVID-19 patients.

09:24 Another 196 people at the Kandakadu Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre tested positive for COVID-19. In total, 252 people at the Centre have tested positive so for, according to the Government Information Department.

20:16 Number of COVID-19 positive cases rise up to 296: three returnees from the UAE, nine from India and one from Pakistan. The number of patients identified at the Kandakadu Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre now at 283.

22:31 Another inmate from Welikada Prison tested positive for COVID-19. The total number of cases identified today increased to 300.

Thursday, July 09

15:31 56 people at the Kandakadu Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre—those who came into contact with the COVID-19 patient who was transferred to the Welikada Prison—and a counsellor attached to the Centre test positive for COVID-19.

20:23 42 people from 10 houses in Chiaw, contacts of the counsellor of the Kandakadu Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre who tested positive for COVID-19, placed in self-quarantine.

Wednesday, July 08

12:55 Commissioner General of Prisons announced that visitors will not be permitted to entre prisons across the island until further notice.

06:15 United States President Donald Trump has formally moved to withdraw from the World Health Organisation (WHO).

15:22 Two Sri Lankan returnees from Bangladesh and one Philippine national tested positive for COVID-19 today.

22:04 315 inmates at the Welikada Prison who were subjected to PCR tests have tested negative for COVID-19.

Tuesday, July 07

21:40 Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro test positive for COVID-19

18:34 Three COVID-19 patients identified so far today; one sailor, a returnee from Ethiopia and the inmate from the Welikada Prison.

14:48 Department of Prison announced visitors will not be permitted to enter the Welikada Prison premises until further notice.

14:20 174 people identified as contacts of COVID-19 patient who was detected from the Welikada Remand Prison and a group of staff from the Kandakadu Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre subjected to PCR tests.

09:46 An inmate recently transferred to the Welikada Remand Prison has tested positive for COVID-19

Monday, July 06  
07:00 Schools that were closed due to the COVID-19 curfew reopened under several stages.

Sunday, July 05  
19:50 Health Services Director-General Dr Anil Jasinghe says five consecutive PCR tests on the Jinthupitiya COVID-19 case, have proved negative. The patient and 154 others who were removed from the area were discharged from hospital.

Thursday, July 02  
23:40 Nearly 150 people were removed from Jinthupitiya, Colombo 13 after one person tested positive for COVID-19. The individual had tested positive during mandatory self-quarantine at his residence, after returning from two weeks at a quarantine camp. Dr Anil Jasinghe, Director-General of Health Services confirmed that this is not a case of community transmission.

Tuesday, June 30

23:00 Five new COVID-19 cases identified so far today; all cases are returnees from Oman. Thirty-three (33) patients have recovered and discharged from hospital. There are 325 currently infected patients in the country.

Monday, June 29

23:50 Five new COVID-19 cases identified so far today. Seventeen (17) patients have recovered and discharged from hospital. There are 353 currently infected patients in the country.

Sunday, June 28

07:00 Number of confirmed COVID-9 cases across the world exceeds 10 million. 500,625 people have died of the virus, 5.4 million have recovered.

11:58 President's Media Division announces that islandwide curfew will be lifted with full effect from today.

23:50 Four new COVID-19 cases identified in the country; 22 have recovered and discharged from hospital. The number of active patients is now at 365.

Saturday, June 27

11:58 Police announce that 14-day mandatory self-quarantine will be imposed on anyone refusing to wear a facemask.

19:40 Nineteen (19) new COVID-19 cases identified today. The number of currently infected patients in the country is now at 383. Twenty recoveries recorded today.

Friday, June 26

23:59 Four new COVDI-19 cases identified so far today. The number of currently infected cases stands at 384. Seventeen recoveries recorded today.

Thursday, June 25

18:32 Nine new COVID-19 cases identified so far today; this includes six Navy personnel and three sea marshals. Number of currently infected persons in the country is 397.

Wednesday, June 24

12:33 Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi reports that 100,000 PCR tests have been carried out in Sri Lanka so far.

20:17 Ten new COVID-19 cases reported so far today; this includes seven returnees from the US and three Navy personnel. The cumulative count of cases has now surpassed the 2,000 mark. The number of currently infected in the country stands at 428.

Tuesday, June 23

22:28 Forty new COVID-19 cases identified so far today; this includes 29 merchant seafarers from Mumbai and 11 returnees from the USA.

Monday, June 22  
23:50 A returnee from Maldives tested positive for COVID-19. The number of active cases in Sri Lanka is now at 414.

Sunday, June 21  
23:59 No new COVID-19 cases identified for the second consecutive day. Twenty-six (26) patients have recovered and discharged from hospital. There are 441 active cases in the country at the moment.

Saturday, June 20  
23:59 No new COVID-19 cases identified today. Twenty-six (26) patients have recovered and discharged from hospital. There are 467 active cases in the country at the moment.

Friday, June 19  
23:50 Three new COVID-19 cases identified so far today. Twenty-five (25) patients have recovered and discharged from hospital. There are 493 active cases in the country at the moment.

Thursday, June 18

23:59 Twenty-two new COVID-19 cases reported so far today; 18 returnees from Dubai, two from Qatar, one each from Russia and the United Kingdom. There are 515 active cases in the country.

Wednesday, June 17

23:59 Nine new COVID-19 patients identified so far today; this includes two sailors, two returnees from Bangladesh and five from India. Twenty-six (26) individuals have recovered and discharged from hospital.

10:00 Nearly 70 percent of all trips to and from Beijing, China's main airport were cancelled as 106 new COVID-19 cases were reported this week. In just five days, Beijing has been beefing up its prevention measures to curb the spread of the virus and decided to raise the emergency response from Level III to Level II on Tuesday night.

Tuesday, June 16

21:40 Ten new COVID-19 cases reported so far today; six sailors and four returnees from Iran. Twenty-nine patients have recovered and discharged from hospital,

07:01 Pre-schools and day-care centres will be reopened from July 1, while adhering to health guidelines.

Monday, June 15

22:45 Sixteen new COVID-19 patients reported so far today. This includes three Navy officers, one returnee from Bangladesh, one from Pakistan, five from Kuwait and six returnees from Maldives.

Sunday, June 14

23:45 Five COVID-19 cases reported so far today; all of whom are Navy personnel.

Saturday, June 13

23:55 Four COVID-19 cases reported so far today. This includes one Navy officer, two returnees from Qatar, and a returnee from India. Fifty-six individuals have recovered and discharged from hospital.

12:29 President's Media Division announced that curfew for the entire country will be imposed from 12 midnight to 04.00 am daily from tomorrow (June 14) onwards.

Friday, June 12

23:50 Three COVID-19 cases reported so far today. This includes two Navy personnel and a returnee from Qatar. Forty-six individuals have recovered and discharged from hospital.

Thursday, June 11

23:50 Eight new COVID-19 cases identified so far today. The number of active cases stands at 716. The number of recoveries is at 1150.

Wednesday, June 10

23:00 Ten COVID-19 cases identified so far today; this includes eight Navy personnel and two returnees from Qatar and India. This brings the number of active cases in the country to 736.

22:15 Sixty-five individuals have recovered and discharged from hospital. The number of recoveries rises to 1122.

Tuesday, June 09

16:15 Government allows public to visit places of worship from 12 June, in accordance to health guidelines. Attendance restricted to 50 people.

23:50 Two new COVID-19 cases have been identified so far today, bringing the number of active cases to 791.

15:00 Government announces that schools will reopen in four phases. Principals, teachers and administrators will return to work on 29 June. Accordingly, Grades 5, 11 and 13 will recommence on 6 July, Grades 10 and 12 on 20 July, while Grade 3-9 on 27 July. The GCE Advanced Level examination has been postponed to 7 September and 2 October. The Grade Five scholarship exam will be on 13 September.

12:30 Sri Lanka surpasses the 1,000 mark in COVID-19 recoveries. Sixty-seven patients have recovered and discharged from hospital so far today. The total number of recoveries is at 1057.

Monday, June 08

23:50 Forty-nine COVID-19 patients have recovered and discharged from hospital. The number of recoveries is at 990.

19:49 Twenty-two new COVID-19 cases reported so far today. This includes 10 Navy officers, four returnees from Chennai, and eight from Kuwait. The number of currently active patients in the country stands at 856.

Sunday, June 07

22:52 Twenty-one new COVID-19 patients identified so far today.

13:16 Fifty COVID-19 patients have recovered and discharged from hospital. The total number of recoveries in the country now at 941.

09:57 Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith requests the government to re-open churches for a limited number of people to pray and attend mass.

Saturday, June 06

22:50 Thirteen new COVID-19 cases identified in the country so far today and 33 individuals have recovered and discharged from hospital.

Friday, June 05

23:00 Four new COVID-19 cases identified thus far today and 19 individuals have recovered and discharged from hospital.

Thursday, June 04

23:00 Forty-right (48) new COVID-19 cases reported so far today. Out of which 36 are Navy officers and others are foreign returnees. The number of active cases at 947, while 839 have recovered and discharged from hospital.

Wednesday, June 03

23:24 Fifty-two cases identified thus far today. Out of the cases reported today, 31 are Navy officers while others are overseas returnees. This brings the total number of active cases to 888.

Tuesday, June 02

23:59 Forty new COVID-19 patients identified today. Out of which 32 returnees from Qatar, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, and Russia. Among the patients are seven Navy officers and an associate of an infected officer.

Monday, June 01

23:29 Ten COVID-19 cases reported so far today, out of which, two are Navy officers, two are contacts of a previously identified patient, and six overseas returnees. This brings the total number of currently active cases to 821.

17:17 One new COVID-19 patient identified; this brings the number of currently active cases in Sri Lanka to 812.

13:04 Ten COVID-19 patients have recovered and discharged from hospital. The total number of recoveries in Sri Lanka is now at 811.

Sunday, May 31

23:26 Thirteen COVID-19 cases identified so far today. Out of the 13, four are Navy officers and nine overseas returnees.

17:50 Eight new COVID-19 cases identified so far today. Seven of the cases are returnees from Russia and the other is a Navy officer. The number of active cases now at 817, number of recoveries 801.

Saturday, May 30

19:30 Five more COVID-19 patients identified; eight new cases identified so far today. This brings the number of currently active patients to 775.

16:47 Three new COVID-19 cases identified so far today, bringing the number of active patients to 770. The total of recoveries is at 780.

Friday, May 29

23:50 Eighteen more individuals tested positive for COVID-19 at various quarantine centres; 28 new cases identified so far today. This brings the number of currently infected patients in the country to 794.

18:45 Ten new COVID-19 cases identified so far today; seven are Navy officers while the other three are returnees from Dubai. Number of active cases at 776, number of recoveries 756.

Thursday, May 28

23:59 Twenty-seven more COVID-19 patients identified; 61 cases reported thus far today. This brings the number of currently infected patients in Sri Lanka to 775.

18:50 Seventeen more COVID-19 positive patients reported. 34 cases reported thus far today; 32 are foreign returness and two others are Navy officers. This increases the number of currently active patients in Sri Lanka to 748.

18:30 Seventeen new COVID-19 cases identified today. This brings the number of currently infected persons in the country to 731. Number of recoveries at 745.

Wednesday, May 27

21:00 Twenty-eight more COVID-19 patients reported, all of whom are overseas returnees; 134 cases identified today.

20:53 Hundred-and-six (106) cases identified thus far today. Out of which 53 are Navy personnel and 53 are returnees from overseas.

14:05 Twenty more COVID-19 patients have recovered and discharged from hospital. This brings the number of recoveries in Sri Lanka to 732.

Tuesday, May 26

22:00 Thirty-nine (39) more tested positive for COVID-19, all cases are returnees from Kuwait undergoing quarantine; 135 new cases identified today. This brings the number of active cases to 595.

19:36 Seventy-nine (79) new COVID-19 cases identified; altogether 96 new cases reported today. Out of which 88 of them are returnees from Kuwait, currently quarantined at Trincomalee and Minneriya quarantine centres. Eight other patients are Navy officers.

16:20 Seventeen (17) new COVID-19 cases identified thus far today. Number of currently active patients in Sri Lanka is now at 477.

12:45 Fifteen (15) COVID-19 patients have recovered and discharged from hospital. The number of recoveries in Sri Lanka is now at 710.

05:00 Curfew in Colombo and Gampaha districts relaxed as of today, alongside the rest of the country. The government has requested the public to follow the guidelines and recommended health practices.

Monday, May 25

21:06 Qatar flight scheduled to repatriate Sri Lankans postponed with more overseas returnees testing positive for COVID-19.

19:30 Forty-one (41) new COVID-19 cases identified thus far today.

17:05 The tenth COVID-19 death is reported in Sri Lanka. The deceased is a 51-year-old woman who returned from Kuwait and was in quarantine in Trincomalee.

13:46 Twenty-one (21) COVID-19 patients have recovered and discharged from hospital. The number of recoveries in the country now at 695.

Sunday, May 24

23:15 Twenty-three (23) people tested positive for COVID-19, all of whom are currently under observation at quarantine centres. With this the number of cases identified today rises to 52—the highest recorded since January. Out of the new cases, 49 are Kuwait returnees, one is a Navy officer and another returnee from Indonesia. The number of currently infected patients in the country is at 458.

18:50 Twenty-four new COVID-19 cases identified; 29 cases reported so far today. This brings the number of currently active cases in the country to 435.

14:45 Four new COVID-19 cases identified; all of whom are returnees from Kuwait currently quarantined in Trincomalee. This brings the number of active cases to 411

14:21 Fourteen COVID-19 patients have recovered and discharged from hospital. The number of total recoveries in Sri Lanka now at 674.

Saturday, May 23

23:57 Eleven new COVID-19 cases identified. This brings the number of currently active cases in the country to 420.

17:05 Ten new COVID-19 cases identified; all of whom are Navy personnel. This brings the number of currently infected patients in Sri Lanka to 409.

13:45 Forty (40) COVID-19 patients have recovered and discharged from hospital. Total recoveries in Sri Lanka is now at 660.

Friday, May 22

19:59 Two more COVID-19 patients identified; four new cases identified thus far. This brings the number of currently infected patients in the country to 430.

18:54 Two more COVID-19 patients identified; all of whom are Navy personnel. This brings the number of currently active cases in Sri Lanka to 428.

13:30 Sixteen more COVID-19 patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital. This brings the number of recoveries in the country to 620.

Thursday, May 21

23:58 Ten more people tested positive for COVID-19; 27 new cases identified so far. This brings the number of currently infected patients in the country to 442.

18:21 Seventeen new COVID-19 cases reported thus far in Sri Lanka today. Two of these naval officers from Mullaitivu quarantine centre, 15 others are returnees from Dubai, currently quarantined at Giragama. There are now 432 infected persons in the country.

13:25 Twenty COVID-19 patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital. This brings the number of recoveries in the country up to 604.

Wednesday, May 20

22:40 One COVID-19 case identified. This brings the number of currently infected persons in the country to 435.

14:50 Fifteen more COVID-19 patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital, bringing the total number of recoveries to 584.

Tuesday, May 19

23:59 Five more patients tested positive for COVID-19 bringing the number of cases identified today to 35; all cases identified within quarantine centres. This brings the total number of currently infected patients to 449.

19:05 Twenty-eight new COVID-19 cases identified today. All of whom are Navy officers from within the Oluvil quarantine centre. This brings the number of currently infected patients to 442.

13:45 Ten more COVID-19 patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital. The total number of recoveries in Sri Lanka is now at 569.

Monday, May 18

20:05 Five new COVID-19 cases identified thus far today. The number of currently infected patients is at 418.

12:49 Twenty-one (21) COVID-19 patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital. This brings the number of total recoveries in Sri Lanka to 559.

Sunday, May 17

23:45 Eleven new COVID-19 cases identified; 21 cases reported thus far today. This brings the number of currently infected patients to 434.

22:03 Ten new COVID-19 cases identified today, bringing the number of currently infected patients to 423 in the country. 209 individuals are currently under observation in hospitals.

13:00 Eighteen COVID-19 patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital, bringing the number of recoveries in the country to 538. Currently, there are 413 infected patients.

Saturday, May 16

21:06 Twelve new COVID-19 patients identified; all are Sri Lanka Navy personnel. This brings the number of currently infected patients in the country to 420.

19:03 Two new COVID-19 cases identified thus far today. The cases were reported from Meeyankulam and the Kandakadu quarantine centres. This brings the number of currently infected persons in Sri Lanka to 408.

15:07 Forty-three (43) COVID-19 patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital. Total recoveries in Sri Lanka now at 520.

Friday, May 15

14:00 Thirty-two more COVID-19 patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital, bringing the total number of recoveries to 477.

Thursday, May 14

19:30 Only one new COVID-19 case identified thus far today. The number of currently infected patients in the country is at 462.

13:11 Sixty-three (63) COVID-19 patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital. This brings the total number of recoveries to 445 in the country.

Wednesday, May 13

19:58 Four new COVID-19 cases have been identified thus far today. The number of currently infected persons is 502.

13:19 Sixteen more COVID-19 patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital, bringing the total number of recoveries in Sri Lanka to 382. The number of currently infected stands at 498.

Tuesday, May 12

23:55 Seven new COVID-19 cases identified in the country, bringing the number of currently infected persons to 514.

19:18 Ten new COVID-19 cases identified thus far today, increasing the number of currently infected persons to 507; 09 out of 10 new cases reported are Navy personnel, the other is an individual at the Kandakadu quarantine centre.

17:00 SriLankan Airlines has commenced offering outbound passage for travellers to London, Tokyo (Narita) Melbourne and Hong Kong which are supporting global lockdown ease. The flights to these areas will operate for both passengers and cargo.

16:00 Government has granted permission to buses (those attached to the Sri Lanka Transport Board, as well as privately owned) and train transportation to recommence tomorrow (13 May) under strict guidelines, in districts where curfew is lifted.

13:50 Twenty-three more COVID-19 patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital, bringing the total number of recoveries to 366.

Monday, May 11

23:04 No new COVID-19 cases have been reported thus far today. The number of currently infected persons stands at 511 in Sri Lanka. 343 have recovered and have been discharged from hospital.

13:09 Twenty-two more COVID-19 patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital, increasing total recoveries to 343.

Sunday, May 10

21:05 Curfew in all other districts except Colombo and Gampaha will be lifted tomorrow at 5.00 am and re-imposed at 8.00 pm daily.

18:10 Eight new COVID-19 cases identified; total number of currently infected persons in the country now at 525.

14:05 Sixty-one (61) COVID 19 patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital today. This increases the number of recoveries to 321.

Saturday, May 9

21:30 Four new COVID- 19, positive patients identified; all are Sri Lanka Navy personnel. This brings the number of currently infected persons in the country to 577.

16:45 Nine new COVID-19 cases identified in the country. The number of currently infected persons now at 580. The new cases have been reported among nine Navy personnel, who are currently under quarantine.

13:24 Fifteen COVID-19 patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital. The number of total recoveries in Sri Lanka is now at 255.

09:59 Colombo Stock Exchange, which was temporarily shut down due to the curfew, has announced that trading will re-commence from Monday, 11 May.

Friday, May 8

23:59 Eleven more people tested positive for COVID-19. Number of currently infected persons now at 586.

13:55 Eight more COVID-19 positive patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital, bringing the total recoveries to 240.

01:03 Eighteen new COVID-19 cases identified, bringing the number of currently infected patients to 583. 232 have recovered.

Thursday, May 7

22:56 The Sri Lanka Association of Government Medical Laboratory Technologists claims a number of PCR tests, conducted to identify COVID-19 cases, are erroneous. Addressing a press conference, the association claimed that four PCR tests carried out on 5 May on patients from Rajagiriya, Modara and Kolonnawa had been faulty.

18:00 Seven new COVID-19 cases identified so far today in Sri Lanka; six of these are Navy officers, the other is an individual who had close contact with a Navy officer.

12:52 Seventeen more COVID-19 patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital. This brings the number of total recoveries in the country to 232.

Wednesday, May 6

19:30 Three new COVID-19 cases identified thus far in Sri Lanka today; all three are Navy officers.

Tuesday, May 5

23:22 Twenty COVID-19 patients were identified in Sri Lanka thus far today, increasing the number of currently infected persons to 549.

21:15 Nine COVID-19 cases recorded thus far today, from the Kolonnawa, Colombo 15 and Rajagiriya areas as well as the Kandakadu Qurantine Centre. Four naval also officers are among the cases recorded.

17:21 Army Commander Lt. Gen. Shavendra Silva says 138 people from Rajagiriya, Kolonnawa and Kolabissa in Kandy, have been moved to quarantine centres, after coming into contact with COVID-19 patient previously.

14:15 The ninth COVID-19 related death is reported in Sri Lanka. The deceased is a 52-year-old woman from Modara who was receiving treatment at IDH.

06:36 Thirty-three (33) people tested positive for COVID-19 on Monday (May 4). 31 of them are Sri Lanka Navy personnel and the other two were detected from quarantine camps. The number of currently infected persons in #SriLanka is at 549.

Monday, May 4

19:36 The eighth COVID-19 related death is reported. The deceased is a 72-year-old woman who was receiving treatment at the Homagama Hospital. The deceased was a resident of Kurunegala.

19:18 Two more people tested positive for COVID-19. Total recoveries in the country rises to 194.

13:58 Three more COVID-19 patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital. This brings the total number of recoveries in Sri Lanka to 187.

Sunday, May 3

23:20 Ten more people tested positive for COVID-19, increasing the number of currently infected persons to 527. Altogether, 13 cases identified thus far.

18:15 Two COVID-19 cases reported thus far today, raising the number of currently infected persons to 518 in the country.

13:22 Akurana and Beruwala areas, which were declared as isolated areas following the detection of COVID-19 patients, have now been re-opened.

12:40 Ten more COVID-19 patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital, raising total number of recoveries to 182.

Saturday, May 2

22:40 Twelve people tested positive for COVID-19 today. The number of currently infected persons in the country is 523

14:40 Over 350 individuals who were stranded in various parts of the Western Province, after the COVID-19 lockdown was initiated, were sent home today, under Police protection.  
As the first phase of the programme, priority was given to pregnant mothers, chronic patients and children who were subjected to a medical check-up and disinfection before returning home.

13:20 Ten more COVID-19 patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital. Altogether, 172 persons from around the country have recovered so far.

Friday, May 1

23:24 Nineteen new patients tested positive for COVID-19, bringing the number of currently infected persons to 521 in the country. Twenty-five cases identified thus far today.

20:30 Public and institutional activities can return to normalcy from May 11, despite the curfew in Colombo, Gampaha, Kalutara and Puttalam.  
President's Media Division announced curfew in the high risk areas will continue until May 11.  
Curfew for other areas will be lifted at 5 AM on May 4 and reimposed at 8 PM on the same day. This will continue until May 6.

17:29 Three more people tested positive for COVID-19. Altogether, six new cases reported thus far today; the number of currently infected persons in the country stands at 507.

15:00 Two more COVID-19 patients are identified, bringing the number of currently infected persons to 504. 145 people are currently under observation in hospitals.

13:01 Three more COVID-19 patients recover. Total recoveries now at 157.

12:42 One more person tested positive for COVID-19 today. The number of currently infected persons in Sri Lanka now is now at 502.

Thursday, April 30

23:16 Fifteen patients who tested positive for COVID-19 have recovered and have been discharged from hospital. The total number of recoveries in Sri Lanka has increased to 154.

19:09 Four new COVID-19 positive patients identified, increasing the number of currently infected persons in Sri Lanka to 507. Health Ministry reports that all four cases were reported from within the Oluvil quarantine centre.

14:45 SriLankan Airlines has issued a notice to students holding Sri Lankan passports in the United Kingdom or Australia, who wish to be repatriated to Sri Lanka, to register themselves with the Sri Lankan High Commission in their respective countries at the earliest.

13:45 Three patients who tested positive for COVID-19 have recovered and have been discharged from hospital. Total recoveries in Sri Lanka now at 139.

Wednesday, April 29

21:35 Curfew in 21 districts except Colombo, Gampaha, Kalutara and Puttalam will be lifted at 5 AM tomorrow, re-imposed at 8 PM. The President's Media Division announced that this will continue till 5 AM on Monday (May 4).

21:06 Five new COVID-19 cases identified; this brings the number of currently infected persons to 484. Two more patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital, bringing the number o recoveries to 136.

14:00 Three new COVID-19 positive patients identified, bringing the number of currently infected individuals to 481 in the country.

10:30 The Colombo Manning Market commenced trading earlier today. The market was closed for two weeks due to COVID-19 fears. The trading opened after it was disinfected by the operatives of the Ministry of Defence.

Tuesday, April 28

20:34 Fifteen new patients test positive for COVID-19, bringing the number of currently infected persons in Sri Lanka to 470. Twenty-three (23) cases thus far today.

17:23 Four new Covid-19 cases identified; eight cases thus far today. Five are Navy officers, three from those in the Punani quarantine centre.

15:38 Four new COVID-19 cases identified; this brings the number of currently infected persons to 451 in Sri Lanka.

14:00 Eight people have recovered and have been discharged from hospital, bringing the total number of recoveries to 134 in the country. The number of currently infected persons receiving treatment stands at 447.

10:05 Director-General of Health Services Dr Anil Jasinghe has issued a set of guidelines to expecting mothers.  
Accordingly, pregnant women with signs of fever, bleeding, severe headache, difficulty in breathing, impaired vision, fits, chest/abdominal pain, reduced foetal movements, swelling of the body, or any other severe discomfort, should seek immediate hospital care.  
Pregnant women attending clinics are also advised to obtain prior appointments to avoid congestion in hospitals.

Monday, April 27

21:52 Three new COVID-19 cases identified; 61 new cases so far. This brings the number of currently infected persons to 451.

20:00 Ten more people tested positive for COVID-19; 58 people tested positive today, so far. The number of currently infected persons now at 448.

19:00 Special Presidential Task Force has been appointed to ensure health security at military camps and bases. Task Force will be led by Marshal of the Air Force and Western Province Governor Roshan Goonetileke.

18:15 Army Commander Lt. Gen. Shavendra Silva says, so far 180 navy officers have been infected; 112 officers were from the Welisara Naval Base, while 68 of them were on leave. Fifty-eight (58) navy families have been moved to quarantine centres in Mihintale and in Boossa.

18:05 Four new COVID-19 cases reported in the country. This brings the number of currently infected persons to 438. Forty-eight (48) cases discovered so far today.

16:50 Ten new COVID-19 cases reported in the country, increasing the number of currently infected persons to 434. Forty-four (44) cases discovered so far today.

15:00 Thirty-four new COVID-19 cases discovered today, increasing the number of currently infected persons to 424.

13:20 Six more people who tested positive for COVID-19 have recovered. The total number of recoveries in Sri Lanka now at 126.

Sunday, April 26

22:10 Twenty new COVID-19 cases identified in the country; the number of currently infected persons increased to 378.

20:41 Eight more tested positive for COVID-19; number of currently infected persons in Sri Lanka now at 358.

20:00 Curfew that was to be lifted 5 AM tomorrow in parts of the island will not be lifted to facilitate returning tri-force personnel to their respective camps.  
Curfew will be lifted in those districts on Tuesday, 28 April at 5 AM and reimposed 8 PM that day.

18:50 Six more people tested positive for COVID-19. The number of currently infected persons now at 350.

16:41 Four new COVID-19 cases reported; this brings the number of currently infected patients to 344, number of those recovered and discharged has increased to 120.

15:30 A navy officer attached to the Navy Headquarters in Colombo has passed away due to Leptospirosis, also known as rat-bite fever. Government Information Department reported that the officer had passed away while receiving treatment in the Intensive Care Unit of the Sri Lanka Navy Hospital.It was confirmed that the officer was not infected with the COVID-19 virus. However, considering the present situation at the Welisara Navy Base, the body will be disposed of in a manner similar to those fallen ill with COVID-19.

14:02 Five more people tested positive for COVID-19, bringing the number of currently infected patients to 340.

12:07 Two new COVID-19 cases identified; this brings the number of currently infected persons to 335 in the country.

Saturday, April 25

22:09 Thirty-two new COVID-19 cases were reported in the country today, bring the total number of active cases to 327; 118 patients have recovered and have left hospitals, according to the Health Ministry.

18:30 Thirteen new COVID-19 cases reported today. Out of the 13, seven were among those at the Kandakadu quarantine centre, one resident of Bandaranayake Mawatha, Colombo 12, four from the Welisara Naval Base, and one from the Moneragala Hospital.This brings the total number of active cases to 310; 118 have recovered, while 237 are currently under observation in hospitals.

18:15 The President's Media Division has introduced a new system based on the last digit of National Identification Cards (NIC) for leaving home.The announcement states that the public is only permitted to leave their residences to purchase goods or medicine.Accordingly,

The announcement does not specify when these measures will be enabled.

18:04 Curfew in Colombo, Gampaha, Kaluthara, Puttalam has been extended till 4 May morning. In other districts, curfew will be lifted at 5 am on 27 April and reimposed again at 8 pm that day. The President's Office has announced that this procedure will continue until 1 May.

12:36 Seven COVID-19 patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital. This brings the total number of those recovered in the country to 116. The number of active patients has reduced to 297.

01:25 Sri Lanka Police says curfew imposed in all High Risk Areas, including Colombo, will be lifted on Monday (27) 5 am.  
Curfew in other police areas and districts will also be lifted on Monday at 5 am.  
Traveling in and out of Colombo, Kaluthara, Gampaha, Puttalam districts will not be allowed until further notice.

Friday, April 24

22:05 Two more COVID-19 cases discovered, bringing to 48 the number of cases reported thus far today. Number of active cases 300, while 183 are under observation in hospital.

18:38 Two more COVID-19 patients have recovered and discharged from hospital, bringing the total to 109.

18:26 Five more COVID-19 cases confirmed. Number of cases reported today now stands at 46. Number of currently active cases is at 300.

17:39 Thirty more naval personnel attached to the Welisara Navy camp tested positive for COVID- 19. This brings the total number of active cases to 295. 41 cases discovered in the country today.

17:18 Six more people tested positive for COVID-19 today. Total number of active cases in Sri Lanka now stands at 265.

15:42 Sri Lanka Navy announces that 4,000 Navy personnel attached to the Welisara Navy Camp and their families have been directed to self-quarantine, while some will undergo PCR tests.

11:17 Five more COVID- 19 positive patients identified, bringing the total number of active cases to 259.

10:45 Health Ministry says 1,142 PCR tests were conducted yesterday (23 April) to identify COVID-19 patients. This is the highest number of PCR tests that were carried out in one day.

07:18 Dr Anil Jasinghe, Director General of Health Services says 530 persons from the Peliyagoda Fish Market, who underwent PCR testing, have tested negative for COVID-19

Thursday, April 23

21:39 Twenty-eight (28) Sri Lanka Navy personnel at the Welisara Navy Camp have tested positive for COVID-19, according to Army Commander Shavendra Silva. This brings the total number of cases discovered today to 38 - the highest recorded number of cases in one day, so far. The total number of active cases stands at 254.

The Welisara Navy Camp has been declared as an isolated area. All Navy personnel who went on leave in the past few days, after quarantine duty, have been requested to report back immediately to undergo PCR tests.

20:59 Three more tested positive for COVID-19, increasing the total number of active cases to 226. Altogether, ten cases have been discovered so far today.

19:43 Two more tested positive for COVID-19, increasing the total number of active cases in Sri Lanka to 223. This brings the number of cases discovered in the country today to seven.

17:58 Two more COVID-19 patients recovered and discharged from hospital bringing total recoveries to 107.

17:10 One more tested positive for COVID-19, bringing the number of cases discovered today to five. Total number of active cases stand at 221.

13:45 Health Ministry says measures will be taken to conduct over 1,000 PCR tests daily to detect COVID-19 patients, with the assistance of private hospitals.

Presently, almost 800 PCR tests are conducted daily on active cases, individuals at quarantine centres and those suspected of infection. With the help of four major private hospitals more tests can be carried out to identify COVID-19 patients, according to Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi.

14:00 The Dengue Research team of the University of Jayawardenapura has successfully sequenced the genetic code of SARS-CoV2 (COVID-19) virus for the first time in the country. The data has been shared with Nextstrain, an international open source project that is tracking the evolution of the virus.

13:58 Four new cases of COVID-19 reported today. This brings the total of active cases to 222.

00:18 Seven more COVID-19 cases detected in the country, bringing the total of cases found on April 22 to 20. Number of active cases now 218. 148 in hospital under observation.

Wednesday, April 22

17:40 A patient at the Polonnaruwa hospital has tested positive for Covid-19, increasing active cases to 211.

13:53 Eleven people have tested positive for Covid-19 increasing the total number of infected in Sri Lanka to 210.

12:40 Two more people who tested positive for COVID-19 have recovered. Total recoveries in Sri Lanka now at 104.

Tuesday, April 21

18:02 Another COVID- 19 positive patient identified in Warakapola. This brings to 6 the number of cases reported today. Active cases currently stands at 203.

11:58 05 more people tested positive for COVID-19, bringing the total of active cases to 204. 98 have recovered, 122 are under observation.

Monday, April 20

16:49 Eight more people have tested positive for COVID-19 today, bringing up the number of cases discovered today to 32- the highest since the outbreak. Total number of active COVID-19 cases in Sri Lanka now at 199.

09:55 Twenty-four new COVID-19 patients confirmed. All are from those quarantined in the Bandaranayakpura area, Colombo 12. This brings the total number of active cases to 192.

Sunday, April 19

18:53 Five more COVID-19 patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital. This brings the total number of recoveries to 96.

17:35 A total of 15 new COVID-19 cases have been recorded This brings the total active number of cases to 171. Health Ministry says all cases are from within quarantine centres.

00:03 Six new COVID-19 cases confirmed. This brings the number of active cases to to 161. All six cases were reported from the Welisara Quarantine Centre.

Saturday, April 18

19:00 The government has decided to relax curfew in all but 25 police divisions in the country from neet week onward. Thereby, curfew imposed on Kotahena, Grandpass, Bambalapitiya, Keselwatta, Maradana, Gothatuwa, Mulleriyawa, Wellampitiya, Mt. Lavinia, Dehiwala, Kohuwala, Jaela, Kochikade, Seeduwa, Puttalam, Marawila, Wennappuwa, Bandaragama, Payagala, Beruwala, Aluthgama, Warakapola, Akurana Alawatugoda, Akkaraipattu will not be lifted. In other areas, curfew will be lifted on April 20 and April 22 and only be reimposed between 8 PM and 5 AM thereafter.

18:15 Four new COVID-19 cases reported. Health Ministry notes that three of the cases were from within the Oluvil Quarantine Centre, while the other was a person who was in self-quarantine. Total number of active cases in Sri Lanka now at 164.

19:21 Nine COVID-19 patients have recovered and have been discharged from hospital. The total count of recoveries in the country now at 86.

Friday, April 17

17:19 Three new #COVID19 cases confirmed at the Punani Quarantine Centre. The total number of active cases now at 164. The Health Ministry also noted that 530 PCR tests have been conducted today.

Thursday, April 16

20:00 Three more COVID-19 patients have been discharged from hospital, bringing to 68 the total number of those recovered in Sri Lanka. There are 163 active cases now, and 161 persons are under observation in hospitals.

12:45 Two COVID-19 patients discharged from hospital, bringing the total number of recoveries to 65. There are currently 166 active cases in the country, while 161 people are under observation.

Wednesday, April 15

21:52 Two more people have tested positive for COVID-19. The total number of active cases in Sri Lanka is now 167.

18:02 Two more COVID-19 patients identified today, bringing the total number of active cases to 165.

14:00 Two more COVID-19 patients have been discharged from hospital, bringing the total number of those recovered to 63 in the country.

Tuesday, April 14

22:30 A total of 15 new COVID-19 cases detected in the country. All cases are from among those quarantined as a result of contact tracing. Number of active patients at 165. 142 under observation.

13:51 Isolation period imposed on Atalugama in Bandaragama lifted, according to the Sri Lanka Army.

13:00 Three more patients who tested positive for COVID-19 have recovered and have been discharged from hospital. The total of those recovered stands at 59, according to the Health Promotion Bureau.

09:00 Two areas in Beruwala—Pannila and Cheena Kotuwa—declared isolated areas by the Sri Lanka Army.

Monday, April 13

Seven people have been arrested by the Criminal Investigation Division for spreading false rumours about COVID-19 on social media, bringing to 16 the total number of those arrested.

Sunday, April 12

20:21 Eleven individuals have tested positive for COVID-19 as a whole today. The discovery brings the total number of active cases to 147.

15:40 A new regulation with regards to cremation of person who have died from COVID-19 has been gazetted by the Government.

Saturday, April 11

17:17 One more person contracts COVID-19 in Sri Lanka, bringing to 137 the total number of currently active cases in the country.

Friday, April 10

12:50 One more COVID-19 patient has recovered and been discharged, bringing the total number of those recovered to 50 in Sri Lanka. There are 133 confirmed cases, while 224 are under observation.

Thursday, April 9

12:44 Three people who tested positive for COVID-19 have recovered. Total recoveries in Sri Lanka is now at 47.

Wednesday, April 8

19:08 The seventh death due to COVID-19 has been recorded in Sri Lanka. The deceased is a 44-year-old male who passed away at the IDH. He was a businessman from Mount Lavinia, and had returned from a trip to Germany.

16:15 Two more people tested positive for COVID-19. Total number of active cases now stands at 140.

12:40 Another case of COVID-19 reported today, bringing the total number of active cases to 138.

10:44 New York City’s death toll from the coronavirus has surpassed 4,000, eclipsing the number killed at the World Trade Center on 09/11.

Tuesday, April 7

22:03 The Chinese city of Wuhan, the epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic, has lifted its outbound travel restrictions, ending a two months-long lockdown.

18:50 Two more COVID-19 positive cases reported, raising total active case number to 137 in Sri Lanka. So far a total of 185 cases have been discovered in the country since the beginning of the outbreak.

17:28 Three new cases of COVID-19 reported in the country. The total number of active cases now stands at 135. The Health Promotion Bureau states that 255 people are currently under observation.

13:12 Four more people who tested positive for COVID-19 have recovered and been discharged from hospital. Total recoveries in Sri Lanka is now at 42.

11:22 Two more people have tested positive for COVID-19. The total number of active cases is now 136 and 257 are currently under observation at hospitals.

10:51 The sixth COVID-19 death has been reported. According to the Director-General of Health Services, Dr Anil Jasinghe, the deceased is an 80-year-old man who was receiving treatment at the National Infectious Diseases Hospital.

Monday, April 6

19:15 Four people have recovered from COVID-19 bringing to 38 the total number of those recovered and discharged from hospital.

13:46 One person has recovered from COVID-19, bringing to 34 the total number of those recovered.

Sunday, April 5

16:54 Four COVID-19 cases have been recorded in Sri Lanka thus far. There are now 136 active cases in Sri Lanka.

Saturday, April 4

19:30 Two people have recovered from COVID-19 bringing to 27 the total number of those recovered. The number of active cases in Sri Lanka currently is 130.

14:23 One more person passed away earlier today, bringing to 5 the number of deaths in Sri Lanka as a result of COVID-19. One more person has also recovered, bringing to 25 the number of those recovered and discharged. There are 129 people currently infected.

07:13 The fifth COVID-19 death reported in Sri Lanka. The victim was a 44-year-old male and a resident of Homagama who had returned from Italy and been sent into quarantine. On 23 March he was admitted to the Welikanda Hospital, on 26 March moved to the ICU. He had no other ailment.

Friday, April 3

22:40 Seven new COVID-19 cases reported, bringing to 131 the total number of active cases in Sri Lanka.

20:28 Two new person have recovered from COVID-19 in Sri Lanka, bringing to 24 the total number of those recovered and discharged. One new case was recorded today, bringing to 124 the total number of active cases.

Thursday, April 2

21:53 Fourth COVID-19 related death reported. The deceased is a 58-year-old male who was being treated at the IDH. He had died form pneumonia-related complications.

20:21 Three more people have been detected with #COVID19, bringing to 127 the total number of active cases in #srilanka. Visit our live blog for more information.

12:21 Two new COVID-19 cases have been confirmed, bringing to 124 the total number of active cases in Sri Lanka.

Wednesday, April 1

23:39 The third COVID-19 death reported in Sri Lanka; the deceased is a 73-year-old male from the Maradana area. He died on admission to the IDH from complications of the disease. The patient had kidney issues, diabetes, and high blood pressure.

19:13 Three more confirmed COVID-19 patients completely recovered and discharged from hospital, bringing the total number of recovered to 21 according to the Epidemiology Unit

17:33 Three new cases of COVID-19 recorded in Sri Lanka today, bringing to 126 the total number of those currently infected.

12:32 Another COVID-19 patient has recovered and been discharged. Total recoveries in Sri Lanka now at 18: Health Promotion Bureau.

09:36 Curfew which was relaxed at 6 AM on all parts of the island today (except for high risk Colombo, Kandy, Gampaha, Kalutara, Puttalam and Jaffna) will be re-imposed at 02 PM today and will be in effect until 06 AM on 06 April and reimposed at 2 PM that day.

Tuesday, March 31

19:45 Ten new COVID-19 cases reported, bringing the total number of active cases in Sri Lanka to 123. This is the highest increase reported thus far in a single day.

16:15 Health Ministry announces seven new COVID-19 cases in Sri Lanka, raising the total number of active cases to 111.

13:00 Two COVID-19 patients have recovered and were discharged today. This brings the total number of recovered cases to 16; the total number of active cases is 104. The Health Promotion Bureau states that no new cases have been reported as of yet today.

12:00 206 people at the Vanni Quarantine Centre were released having completed the 14-day quarantine. The group is made up of 173 men and 33 women. The group also includes two foreigners.

Monday, March 30

18:57 A 64-year-old male being treated for COVID-19 at the Negombo Hospital has passed away, bringing the total number of deaths in Sri Lanka to two.

18:22 President's Media Division announces that curfew for all districts excluding Colombo, Gampaha, Kalutara, Puttlam, Kandy and Jaffna will be in effect until 06 AM Wednesday (01 April).

09:47 Three new COVID- 19 cases identified in Sri Lanka bringing the total number of active cases to 108, according to the Epidemiology Unit, Ministry of Health.

Sunday, March 29

20:40 Two new cases of COVID-19 have been reported, bringing to 105 the total number of active cases in the country. The number of those under observation is 117, while 11 people have recovered and been discharged.

9:27 President’s Media Division announces that curfew in Colombo, Gampaha, Kalutara, Puttalam, Kandy and Jaffna districts will continue until further notice. Curfew in the other districts will be lifted at 6 AM tomorrow (March 30) and will be imposed again at 2 PM on the same day.

Saturday, March 28

20:30 Three more COVID 19 infected persons identified within Sri Lanka, bringing the total number of those currently infected to 103.

20:08 The first death from COVID 19 in Sri Lanka was just reported - the deceased a 60-year-old from Marawila who was being treated at the ICU of the IDH. Health DG Dr Anil Jasinghe said the deceased had undergone a kidney transplant several years ago, was diabetic and had high blood pressure.

16:22 One new case of COVID-19 detected, bringing to 101 the total number of active cases. 199 people are still under observation.

15:43 Health Promotion Bureau stats (updated 15: 03) indicate three new cases detected thus far today, bringing total number of those currently affected to 100. 199 currently under observation, 9 recovered and discharged.

9:41 A group of more than 300 people were released from quarantine centres this morning after they completed their two-week quarantine period.

Friday, March 27

16:16 Government issues strict warning to public on adhering to regulations while curfew is in place. Remind public that curfew was imposed to protect them from COVID-19 and that walking on streets and traveling in vehicles is prohibited unless sanctioned by Police through curfew pass. Instructs Police and tri-forces to strictly enforce regulations.

14:35 The govt. has identified a number of pharmacies islandwide that will deliver medicine to your doorstep. Payment can be made online or cash on delivery. The list of pharmacies and information on how to place your order can be accessed here.

09:47 Foreign Ministry confirms that a 59-year-old Sri Lankan male living in Switzerland has passed away from COVID-19. He passed away on Wednesday (25 March). He is originally from Punkuduthivu and held residence permit in Switzerland.

13:09 Health Promotion Bureau stats indicate one more person has recovered from COVID-19, bringing the total number of those recovered to 7. Number of active cases currently stands at 99, while those under observation is at 238.

Thursday, March 26

21: 44 Four new cases of COVID-19 were discovered in today, bringing to 100 the total number of those currently affected.

18:30 Govt. declares March 30 to April 3 a 'Work from Home' week. This period will not be considered a government holiday. It applies to both public and private sectors with the exception of those services declared essential.

Wednesday, March 25

17:00 Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi says no new COVID-19 cases reported as of 16:30.

12:12 Health Promotion Bureau stats indicate one more person has recovered from COVID-19 in Sri Lanka, bringing total number of those recovered to 3 (including Chinese female). Total active COVID-19 cases now 99, with 225 under observation.

9:40: The Health Promotion Bureau clarifies that the total number of active COVID-19 cases are at 100. The number of those under observation is 229. Two individuals have recovered and have been discharged.

Tuesday, March 24

19:28 Health Promotion Bureau data indicated that the total number of those with COVID-19 is 102. Five cases were reported today.

16:42 The number of active COVID-19 cases increases to 101, after four new cases were reported today. 229 suspected cases are under medical observation. Two have recovered and were discharged.

15:28 Health Ministry announces the number of active COVID-19 cases in Sri Lanka is 100. 229 suspected cases are under medical observation. Two have recovered and were discharged.

10:28 Over 300 persons — 108 from the Kandakadu Quarantine Centre and 203 from the Punani Quarantine Centre were allowed to return home this morning having completed their quarantine period.

Monday, March 23

22:00 The total number of active COVID-19 cases in Sri Lanka is now 93, according to the Health Promotion Bureau.

18:04 Director General Health Services Dr Anil Jasinghe says total number of those with COVID19 has risen to 91. Health Promotion Bureau data indicates number of those under observation has increased from 222 to 227.

15:51 The first Sri Lankan to test positive for COVID-19, a 52-year-old tour guide, has been discharged from hospital.

12:22 Curfew on Colombo, Gampaha, Puttlam, Jaffna, Mullaitivu, Killinochchi, Vavuniya and Mannar will be lifted at 6 AM tomorrow (24), reimposed at 12 noon until 6 AM on Friday (27) and reimposed again at 12 noon that day. In other districts, curfew will be reimposed at 2 PM today and will continue till 6 AM Thursday (26). It will be reimposed again at noon the same day.

06:04 Five new cases of COVID-19 reported overnight, bringing the number of active cases to 86.

Sunday, March 22

17:20 Health DG Dr Anil Jasinghe says four people were detected with COVID-19 thus far, bringing the total number of active cases to 81.

16:35 Curfew imposed on all five districts in the Northern Province—Mannar, Vavuniya, Mullaitivu, Killinochchi and Jaffna—will be extended until 6 AM, Tuesday (March 24) and reimposed at 2 PM the same day. The decision was made in order to identify those who came into contact with a Swiss pastor who tested positive for COVID-19 so that can be sent to quarantine.

15:54 Health Promotion Bureau reports that the number of those affected by COVID-19 is now 80.

06:54 Health Ministry announces the Neville Fernando Hospital will be used to treat expectant mothers suspected of having COVID-19. The Homagama Base Hospital in Mulleriyawa will be used for suspect cases, the Voice of America building complex to treat those infected and the KDU Hospital ICU for serious cases.

Saturday, March 21

20:00 One person died and four others were injured in a shooting that occurred at the Anuradhapura Prison after security forces personnel and inmates clashed during a riot.

19:03 Another case of COVID-19 has been detected, bringing the total number of currently active cases to 76.

18:06 The Gazette notification postponing the General Elections scheduled for April 25 has been issued. A new date for the election will be announced after May 14.

18:03 The weekend curfew currently in place will be extended till 6 AM Tuesday (March 24) and reimposed at 2 PM in the Puttalam, Colombo and Gampaha districts. The curfew imposed on other districts will be lifted at 6 AM on Monday and reimposed at 2 PM the same day until 6 AM Tuesday.

16:20 Four new cases of COVID-19 have been detected, bringing to 75 the total number of currently active cases.

15:20 No new cases of COVID19 have been reported thus far today. The total number of currently active cases is 71, while 245 individuals are under observation.

12:12 The Health Ministry has designated the Homagama General Hospital as a COVID-19 treatment centre. Patients who are currently being treated will be either transferred or moved home in the next two days.

10:30 The Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC) has directed all operators to provide data extensions and double-up offers at nominal rates in view of the government-mandated 'work from home week' and asks the public to reach out to their respective service providers for further information.

Friday, March 20

23:05 The number of those affected by COVID-19 has increased by 2 bringing to 72 the total number of those affected - Health Promotion Bureau

17:14 Health Promotion Bureau says 70 people have now contracted COVID-19 within Sri Lanka.

14: 50: The Transport Ministry has announced that contrary to previous reports, all expressways will be open till 6 PM today. In addition, extra buses and trains will operate to ensure commuters are able to go home before curfew is imposed.

11:46 The Ministry of Health reports that the number of those confirmed with the COVID-19 infection in Sri Lanka has increased to 65.

09:09 President’s Office announces islandwide curfew from 6 PM today to Monday 6 AM.

08:30 Police curfew imposed on Puttalam, Kochchikade, Wattala and Ja-Ela Police divisions will be lifted at 9 AM and re-imposed at 12 noon.

07:54 California state has ordered it's 40 million residents to stay at home, restricting non-essential movements to control the spread of the coronavirus that threatens to overwhelm the state's medical system.

Thursday, March 19

21:58 A temporary Police curfew has been imposed on the Wattala and Ja-ela police areas from 10 PM until further notice.

16:18 Health Services Director-General Dr Anil Jasinghe says three more patients have tested positive with COVID-19, bringing the total to 59.

15:50 Health Services Director General Dr Anil Jasinghe says four more patients identified with COVID19, bringing total to 56.

14:15 Election Commission Chair Mahinda Deshapriya has announced the General Election cannot be held on 25 April due to the prevailing situation in the country and will, therefore, be postponed.

12:43 The Epidemiology Unit of the Health Ministry announces two more COVID-19 infected Sri Lankans, bringing the total infected to 52.

09:12 The coronavirus has been identified in all 50 US states. At least 8,017 people across every state, plus Washington, DC and three US territories, have tested positive and at least 140 people have died.

07:56 For the first time since the coronavirus crisis began, China reported no new local infections for the previous day. Officials said 34 new coronavirus cases had been confirmed, all involving people who had come to China from elsewhere.

07:05 A relief package to provide sick leave, unemployment benefits, free coronavirus testing, and food and medical aid to people affected by the pandemic was signed into law by President Donald Trump after the Senate passed it by a wide margin. It was approved by the House last week.

Wednesday, March 18

16:50 Health Services Director General Dr Anil Jasinghe has said that exit screenings will be conducted at exit ports to prevent those with fever from leaving the country, in order to fulfil international obligations.

16:28 Health Services Director General Dr Anil Jasinghe has said that a decision has been made to allow private hospitals to test for COVID-19 under strict conditions. Conditions include testing only those who display symptoms. Private hospitals have been informed that tests can cost no more than Rs. 6, 000 and has to be carried out under the supervision of the Epidemiology Unit of the Health Ministry.

16:19 The Government announced that eight new COVID-19 cases were reported today, bringing to 50 the total number of those affected.

16:02 Army Commander Lt. General Shavendra Silva says the Sri Lankan pilgrims who will be brought back from India will be quarantined upon arrival.

13:41 Local media reports that Police will impose a curfew on 11 police areas in the Puttalam police division, 7 police areas in the Chilaw police division and the Kochchikade police division of Negombo.

11:00 Sri Lanka Navy has established a new quarantine centre which can house 136 people at the Boossa Navy Camp

07:00 The Trump administration is considering a plan to turn back all people who cross the border illegally from Mexico, using powers they say the president has during pandemics to mount what would be one of the most aggressive attempts to curtail illegal immigration.

06:40 The European Union will ban travellers from outside the EU bloc for 30 days in an unprecedented move to seal its borders amid the coronavirus crisis.

Tuesday, March 17

21:47 President Gotabaya Rajapaksa instructs banks and financial institutions not to collect loan repayments for six months as a relief measure during this outbreak.

19:37 Government Information Department has announced that the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases has risen to 43.

17:05 Police have introduced five new numbers to call and register on if you have arrived from Europe, Iran and South Korea between March 1-10.  
011 2 44 44 80  
0112 44 44 81  
0115 978720  
0115 978730  
0115 978734  
119  
or email on: lahd@police.lk

16:57 Health Minister Pavithra Wanniaarachchi has announced that the number of active COVID-19 cases has risen to 34.

15:27 President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has said he doesn’t see the need to initiate a country-wide lockdown at the moment. “It has not spread greatly. We can contain it.”

12:23 The Civil Aviation Authority has announced that Qatari, Bahraini and Canadian nationals will not be allowed to land in Sri Lanka for two weeks with effect midnight tonight (March 17). This restriction will not apply to transit passengers provided they are 1. not nationals 2. have not visited the aforementioned three countries within the last 14 days and 3. have not visited countries previously designated as high-risk (Italy, Iran, South Korea, United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Spain, Germany, Austria, Netherlands, Denmark).

11:32 The Sri Lankan Army has decided to temporarily transform all Army holiday homes in Diyatalawa into quarantine centres for returnees. Five more buildings under the security force headquarters in Wanni, Vavuniya will also be used as a quarantine centre.

8:12 Police Headquarters announce that all passengers who arrived from South Korea, Iran and Europe between March 1-15, can register by calling the nearest police station.

8:00 The Defence Ministry says 170 Sri Lankans from Italy & South Korea have evaded quarantine and urges them to register with police immediately; legal action against those who fail to comply.

7:40 President’s Media Division announced President Gotabaya Rajapaksa will address the nation at 8 PM today.

7:20 WHO has called for every suspected coronavirus case to be tested as worldwide death toll increased to 7138 with 181,580 infected.

00:31 Associated Press reports that a group of U.S. researchers have tested an experimental coronavirus vaccine, even as the pandemic surges.

Monday, March 16

23: 57 The government has declared a three-day holiday (17, 18, 19) for all services except for health, food supply, transport, banks, district, divisional secretariats and other essential services.

22:56 - Sri Lankan Airlines says it has asked all those who operated flights with First Officer said to have contracted COVID-19 to self-quarantine, with monitoring from airline and state health officials. Simulation Training Centre he visited on March 14, 15 also shut down for sanitization, instructors advised to self-quarantine.

21:25 Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin has ordered a lockdown of all public activities in the country from March 18-31. Malaysia has the most confirmed cases in Southeast Asia at 553.

21:11 Government Information Department announces that the number of COVID-19 cases in Sri Lanka has risen to 28.

16:47 Government Information Department has announced the 22nd confirmed case of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka. The 73-year-old male is receiving treatment at Karapitiya Hospital.

14:42 Three more cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed in Sri Lanka, the Health Ministry announced. This brings the total of active cases to 21.  
The new patients include a 13-year-old girl and two men aged 34 and 50.

12:31 The Ministry of Buddhasasana, Cultural and Religious Affairs has decided to temporarily close all 11 museums in the country until further notice.

10:10 New Zealand bans gatherings of 500 people or more and has become the latest country to ban large gatherings.

Italy on Sunday reported 368 new deaths from the coronavirus outbreak as the country’s death toll hit 1,809 while the number of positive cases rose to 24,747 from 21,157 on Saturday, the country’s civil protection authority said.

Sunday, March 15

20:48 Seven more Sri Lankan patients infected with COVID-19 have been identified. Health Ministry stated that all patients are males who had arrived from Italy and are now at Kandakadu camp. This brings the total number of active cases to 18.

18:27 The 11th confirmed COVID-19 case reported in Sri Lanka; a 45-year-old who returned from Germany is currently being treated at IDH.

18:04 The Government Information Department introduced a hotline - 117 - that will directly connect you to the Presidential Task Force to Combat COVID-19 where the public can obtain or provide information on the outbreak.

16:50 All flights to Sri Lanka from the UK, Belgium and Norway will be suspended for two weeks with effect from Monday (16) night.

15:55 The Civil Aviation Authority has announced that the Jaffna International Airport closed for a period of two weeks with immediate effect.

14:30 Airport administration has said all passengers from 11 countries including France, Germany, Denmark, Russia and Sweden will be quarantined upon arrival.

13:15 The ACJU has requested the Muslim community to temporarily halt Jummah and the five times congregational prayers at masjids and all kinds of public gatherings until further notice.

13:06 The Elections Commission has announced that deposits and nominations for the General Election will not be accepted tomorrow as it is a Public, Bank and Mercantile holiday. Deadline for postal votes applications also extended till March 17 midnight.

12:22 The Ministry of Buddhasasana has requested the general public to refrain from pilgrimages and trips in order to reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection.

Saturday, March 14

The ninth and tenth confirmed COVID-19 cases reported in Sri Lanka; the patients are a 56-year-old female who returned from Italy and a 17-year-old female relative of a patient already infected.

Dehiwala National Zoo, Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage, Pinnawala Zoo & Ridiyagama Safari Park will be closed for two weeks from tomorrow (15).

UAE has suspended the issuance of all visas except for those holding diplomatic passports; decision effective as of March 17.

The eighth confirmed case of COVID-19 reported in Sri Lanka; 42-year-old male detected at Kandakadu Quarantine Center who is currently being treated at the Polonnaruwa Hospital.

Decision reached to cancel all Sunday masses for two weeks in all Catholic Churches in the Archdiocese of Colombo & Diocese of Chilaw.

Monday, 16 March declared a public, bank and mercantile holiday in Sri Lanka, in an effort to contain COVID-19.

The number of deaths from COVID-19 has risen to 5,421 worldwide. There are at least 145,627 cases of infection globally.

The US Congress and the White House have struck a deal on a sweeping relief package to assist people impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak.

US President Donald Trump has officially declared a national emergency, that he said would give states and territories access to up to USD 50 billion in federal funds to combat the spreading epidemic.

Health Ministry has announced that two more cases have been identified, bringing the total number of confirmed cases to seven.

Police has been instructed not to allow large public gatherings for the next two weeks.

Friday, March 13

The Civil Aviation Authority has announced a travel ban for air passengers from Iran, Italy & South Korea for two weeks.

Over 95 percent of larger Chinese firms outside Hubei province, the epicentre of COVID-19 outbreak, have resumed work.

A female diplomat from the Philippine mission to the United Nations has tested positive for the coronavirus, making her the first known case at the New York headquarters.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s wife, Sophie, has tested positive for COVID-19. Trudeau’s office had earlier said that the Canadian first lady returned from a speaking engagement in Britain and had mild flu-like symptoms, including a low fever. Trudeau is in self-quarantine at home.

Schools in several European countries, including Ireland, Portugal, and Belgium, have shut due to the outbreak.

India has reported it's first COVID-19 death; a 76-year-old man in the southern state of Karnataka.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs says that with effect from noon today (13), Electronic Travel Authorization on arrival for foreigners who hold ordinary passports will be temporarily suspended until further notice. Citizens of Singapore, Maldives and Seychelles will not be affected.

The CAA has announced that passengers from France, Spain, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, Netherlands, Sweden & Austria will not be permitted to enter the country from 15th to 29th March. The President has also instructed authorities to suspend the issuance of visa to Europeans for two weeks. Meanwhile, Sri Lankans arriving from Europe will be quarantined for 14 days.

Three more people have tested positive for COVID-19 in Sri Lanka. Two, aged 37 and 43, had arrived from Italy and were in quarantine at the Kandakadu camp. The third, aged 41, had arrived from Germany.

Thursday, March 12

The number of deaths from COVID-19 has risen to 4, 633 worldwide. There are at least 126, 367 cases of infection globally.

Saudi Arabia has temporarily suspended travel of citizens and residents and halted flights with several states. The ban includes the European Union, Switzerland, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Sudan, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Eritrea, Kenya, Djibouti, and Somalia.

Greece reported its first fatality from COVID-19. The man who died was 67 and had recently returned from a religious pilgrimage to Israel and Egypt.

Tom Hanks and his wife, Rita Wilson are in isolation in a hospital in Australia, after testing positive for the virus.

The US has suspended all travel from Europe, with the exception of the United Kingdom. The ban will remain in force for a month.

A second Sri Lankan, who shared lodging with the first Sri Lankan to contract COVID-19, has also contracted the virus and has been admitted to the IDH. The second patient is a 44-year-old man, according to the Ministry of Health.

The Catholic Education Office has said all private Catholic schools in Colombo will be closed until March 26.

Education Minister Dullas Allahaperuma has said all government schools in Sri Lanka will be closed from March 13 to April 20 as a precautionary measure against COVID-19.

The Government Information Department together with the Health Ministry and the Health Promotion Bureau has set up a hotline for the general public to obtain information on COVID-19: 0710107107 or 0113071073

Wednesday, March 11

Preliminary tests have confirmed a Sri Lankan infected with COVID-19. The 52-year-old tour guide is the first Sri Lankan to have been infected with the disease since the inception of the outbreak and is being treated at the National Infectious Disease Hospital.

The number of deaths from COVID-19 has risen to 4, 299 worldwide. There are at least 119, 220 cases of infection globally.

The Washington State in the US plans to ban gatherings and events of more than 250 people in the Seattle area.

Panama’s health minister confirmed eight cases of COVID-19, including one death, the first virus-linked fatality in Central America.

Nadine Dorries, a junior health minister in the UK government, has been diagnosed with COVID-19 and is in isolation.

Tuesday, March 10

The number of deaths from COVID-19 has risen to 4, 027 worldwide. There are at least 114, 422 cases of infection globally.

Over 160 Sri Lankan expats and foreigners will be sent to quarantine centers in Punani and Kandakadu.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has pledged as much as USD 125 million to help speed the development of treatments for COVID-19. The money is intended to ensure drugs to treat the virus will be affordable, and available in poor countries.

President Xi Jinping has arrived in Wuhan on his first visit to the city where the outbreak originated.

Mongolia has barred anyone from entering or leaving its cities for six days after reporting its first case of COVID-19.

US President Donald Trump has not been tested for COVID-19, even though at least two lawmakers with whom he has recently come into contact are in self-isolation after attending a conference where a delegate was confirmed with the virus.

A 40-year-old woman in Panama has tested positive for COVID-19—the country’s first case.

Monday, March 9

The number of deaths from COVID-19 has risen to 3, 831 worldwide. There are at least 110, 092 cases of infection globally.

The Ministry of Buddha Sasana has announced that Dambadiva pilgrimage tours to India will be temporarily suspended with immediate effect.

Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte has signed a decree that has put millions of people across northern Italy on lockdown. The largely unprecedented move puts the entire Lombardy region, as well as 14 other provinces, under travel restrictions.

The northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh is denying entry to all foreign nationals over coronavirus fears, the state government announced.

Qatar has temporarily barred travelers from 14 countries, including Sri Lanka, from March 9 as a precaution against the COVID-19 outbreak.

Health Services Director General, Dr Anil Jasinghe has asked that Sri Lankans returning from abroad self-quarantine at home for 14 days. Has also requested that foreign travel is restricted in the coming days due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Sunday, March 8

The number of deaths from COVID-19 has risen to 3, 600 worldwide. There are at least 106, 193 cases of infection globally.  
  
There are 442 cases of the novel coronavirus in the United States, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and state and local governments.  
  
Search and rescue efforts are underway after about 70 people were trapped in a hotel collapse in southeastern China. The hotel was used as a coronavirus quarantine center.

Saturday, March 7

The number of deaths from COVID-19 has risen to 3, 497 worldwide. There are at least 102, 237 cases of infection globally.

G20 finance ministers and central bank governors pledged to take “appropriate” fiscal and monetary measures in responding to the coronavirus outbreak and to protect economic growth against shocks, the Reuters news agency reports.

Friday, March 6

Tokyo Olympics organisers have held a test event amid fears of the spread of coronavirus. They allowed a sport climbing event on Friday to go ahead, with a few restrictions: no fans and no top athletes.

The Vatican has also reported its first COVID-19 case, saying it had suspended outpatient services at its health clinic after a patient tested positive. Meanwhile, Cameroon also confirmed its first case of COVID-19 after a 58-year-old French citizen tested positive for the virus.

In Serbia, health minister Zlatibor Loncar reported that a 43-year-old man became the first person in Serbia to be infected with COVID-19.

Thursday, March 5

Israel and the Palestinian Authority have imposed a closure on Bethlehem and surrounding towns and villages, following the discovery of seven cases of COVID-19 in the Palestinian city. President Mahmoud Abbas also declared a state of emergency across the West Bank.

Vice President Mike Pence said the United States doesn’t have enough COVID-19 tests, at this point, to meet what officials expect to be the demand for them in the future.

Wednesday, March 4

The number of deaths from COVID-19 has risen to 3, 203 worldwide. There are at least 93, 160 cases of infection globally.

South Korea’s President Moon Jae-in has called off a planned trip to the UAE, Egypt and Turkey in mid-March because of the COVID-19 outbreak. The outbreak in South Korea is the largest outside China.

Japan has decided that the Olympic Games will go ahead as planned despite the outbreak of COVID-19.

Tuesday, March 3

The number of deaths from COVID-19 has risen to 3, 125 worldwide. There are at least 90, 932 cases of infection globally.

The first Sri Lankan COVID-19 patient has been reported from Italy, the Sri Lankan Foreign Ministry said. The victim, a 46-year-old woman, reportedly from the Horana area, has been admitted to a hospital in Brescia, Italy. The Sri Lankan embassy in Italy says the woman is stable.

Lee Man-hee, the founder of the controversial Shincheonji Church of Jesus, has tested negative for COVID-19, after he was taken to a ‘drive-through’ test site. The church is at the centre of the outbreak in South Korea and has been heavily criticised over its response to the virus. Lee apologised and called the epidemic a “great calamity” but refused to be tested by public authorities until a local governor threatened to drag him by force to be tested.

Australia’s Attorney General Christian Porter has said the government will use its biosecurity law to restrict the movements of people suspected of having COVID-19. The government would use the law to either designate some places out of bounds or place a patient in detention at home.

WHO Director General Dr Tedros Adhanom has said the world is in “uncharted territory” with COVID-19 because while the infection can spread through a community, it can also be contained.

Monday, March 2

The New England Journal of Medicine published its latest report on COVID-19, in which it extracted data regarding 1, 099 patients from 552 hospitals in 30 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities in China. Main points of the study reported that the median age of the patients was 47 years and 41.9% of the patients were female; 5% were admitted to intensive care and 1.4% had died.

Indonesia reported its first case of COVID-19; President Joko Widodo said two Indonesians had tested positive for the infection, marking the first confirmed cases in the world’s fourth most populous country.

Sunday, March 1

The number of deaths from COVID-19 has risen to 3, 053 worldwide. There are at least 89, 075 cases of the infection globally.

Two Sri Lankans who arrived from Italy, and were admitted to the National Infectious Disease Hospital with symptoms of the flu, have tested negative for the infection.

Officials in Seoul, South Korea are accusing the church at the epicentre of the country’s COVID-19 outbreak, of murder. A case has been filed by prosecutors, claiming leaders of Shincheonji–the Christian church where the first cases were reported, are liable for the outbreak, because they didn’t cooperate with efforts to stop the disease.

Andrew Cuomo, the Governor of New York, said the US’s first case of COVID-19 was someone who had recently returned from Iran.

The WHO says the outbreak has reached the “highest level” of risk for the world, with the director-general warning it can go in “any direction”.

Saturday, February 29

The number of deaths from COVID-19 has risen to 2, 978 worldwide. There are at least 86, 991 cases of infection globally.

Luxembourg announced its first COVID-19 infection, a man who recently returned from Italy. The man in his 40s exhibited symptoms at the beginning of the week and testing in Luxembourg confirmed the disease.

One person has died in Washington state of the COVID-19, making it the first reported death in the United States. The person who died was a woman in her 50s.

The number of cases in Italy has exceeded 1, 000 with the death toll rising to 29 in the past 24 hours.

Qatar’s health ministry has reported the first case of infection in the country. The patient is a 36 year old man who was recently evacuated from Iran on a government-chartered plane and had been in quarantine with other evacuees.

Friday, February 28

The number of deaths from COVID-19 has risen to 2, 859 worldwide. There are at least 83, 387 cases of infection globally.

Two Sri Lankans who arrived from Italy have been admitted to the IDH after showing signs of fever and coughing.

Nigeria, Belarus, New Zealand and Lithuania have announced the first infections of COVID-19.

A popular video game that allows players to create a virus and spread it worldwide has been pulled from Apple’s App Store in China. Users based in China could not download ‘Plague Inc.’ on Friday after the cyberspace watchdog UK-based Ndemic Creations ordered its removal over “illegal” content.

Mongolia President Khaltmaagiin Battulga and his accompanying staff who travelled to China have been placed under quarantine. Battulga was the first foreign leader to visit China amidst the outbreak.

WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has said all nations should prepare themselves for a potential pandemic. “This virus has pandemic potential,” Tedros said in Geneva. About 12 countries have reported their first virus cases in the past 24 hours.

Thursday, February 27

The number of deaths from COVID-19 has risen to 2, 807 worldwide. There are at least 82, 393 cases of infection globally.

Japan will close schools nationwide to help control the spread of COVID-19, the government has announced. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has asked all elementary, middle and high schools to remain shut until spring holidays in late March.

Mojtaba Zonnour, head of the Iranian parliament’s National Security and Foreign Relations Commission has said that he is infected with COVID-19. He is currently in quarantine.

Estonia and Denmark have confirmed their first COVID-19 cases. In Estonia, a man who returned from Iran was confirmed as infected, while in Denmark, a man who returned from a ski holiday in northern Italy was reported infected.

Qianjiang, a city of around one million people in China’s Hubei province, has said it will pay residents as much as 10, 00 yuan (USD 1,425.96) if they proactively report symptoms of the illness, and the symptoms are confirmed after testing.

Wednesday, February 26

The number of deaths from COVID-19 has risen to 2, 764 worldwide. There are at least 80, 997 cases of infection globally.

An American soldier stationed in South Korea has tested positive for the COVID-19. The 23-year-old man, is the first confirmed infection among the 28, 500 US troops stationed in the south. San

Francisco has declared a local emergency over the COVID-19 outbreak, despite having no cases, as US officials urged Americans to prepare for the spread of infections within their communities.

WHO officials say it’s still too early to declare the COVID-19 a pandemic — but say it is time to prepare.

In the US, President Donald Trump has remained publicly optimistic about the virus, tweeting, ‘CDC and my Administration are doing a GREAT job of handling Coronavirus, including the very early closing of our borders to certain areas of the world.’ His decision has been criticised by the Democrats, however.

Iran’s Deputy Health Minister Iraj Harirchi has tested positive for COVID-19, as the country struggles to contain an outbreak that has thus far killed 15 people.

Tuesday, February 25

The number of deaths from COVID-19 has risen to 2, 701 worldwide. There are at least 80, 150 cases of infection globally.

About 60% of Chinese firms face operation difficulties due to the COVID-19 outbreak. At least 6% of them face bankruptcy and 20% see a temporary suspension. Just 5% see no obvious impact from the outbreak, the Global Times survey reports.

The White House has requested USD 1.25 billion in emergency funding to address the COVID-19 outbreak, as well as the ability to tap an additional USD 535 million in emergency funds already appropriated.

Monday, February 24

The number of deaths from the COVID-19 has risen to 2, 619 worldwide. There are at least 79, 561 cases globally.

Cases in South Korea have surged past 600. Around half the total cases are associated with a branch of a religious group in the south of the country.

The total confirmed COVID-19 cases in Italy has risen from three to 132 over the weekend, a spike that is attributed to a rise in infections in the country’s north. This is the biggest outbreak outside Asia.

Iran’s health ministry has confirmed 43 cases of the virus, including eight deaths.

Sunday, February 23

The global death toll related to COVID-19 stands at 2, 462 with 78, 771 confirmed cases.

The Japanese Ministry of Health has discovered that 23 passengers from the Diamond Princess cruise ship were released after quarantine without being retested. The Ministry also confirmed that one of the ship’s passengers, a woman in her 60s from Japan, tested positive for COVID-19 after disembarking on February 19.

More than half of South Korea’s COVID-19 cases are linked to a branch of a controversial religious group Shincheonji, in the southern city of Daegu. At least 231 of the country’s 433 confirmed cases are associated with the religious group.

The total number of cases reported in South Korea in the past 24 hours stands at 229, after 142 new cases were confirmed overnight.

Saturday, February 22

The global COVID-19 related death toll stands at 2, 251 while the number of infections has reached 77, 277.

A patient in the northern city of Padua , Italy has died after being infected with COVID-19. The man, aged 78, is the first Italian victim of the disease.

Kuwait’s civil aviation authority has decided to stop all flights to and from Iran amid fears of the COVID-19 outbreak. Kuwaiti nationals arriving from Iran will be subjected to quarantine and residents or those with entry permits who were in Iran in the past two weeks will be barred.

Lebanon and Israel have confirmed their first cases of COVID-19.

Friday, February 21

COVID-19 has now killed 2, 247 people and has infected over 76, 000 people around the world.

Dozens of people clashed with police outside a hospital in central Ukraine over government plans to quarantine evacuees from COVID-19-hit China in the facility.

A continued decline in the number of new cases of COVID-19 infections in China is encouraging, the World Health Organisation said, but it is too early to know if this trend will continue.

The COVID-19 outbreak in China had caused a drop in trade with neighbouring Russia of one billion roubles (USD 15.7 million) a day, Finance Minister Anton Siluanov said.

Thursday, February 20

The first case of COVID-19 related death reported in Middle East. Iran’s health ministry says two people have died after preliminary tests came back as positive for the new coronavirus disease, COVID-19. They were the first two suspected cases of COVID-19 to be announced in Iran.

COVID-19 has now killed more than 2, 120 people, all but six of them in mainland China. It has infected more than 75, 000 people.

The passengers aboard the Diamond Princess cruise ship in Japan began disembarking after a 14-day quarantine. A total of 624 cases of the virus are linked to the ship, many of whom were released previously, having not shown symptoms.

The Chinese Government has revoked the press credentials of three Wall Street Journal reporters, due to an opinion piece that was published earlier this month, titled ‘China is the real sick man of Asia’. This is the largest such expulsion of overseas media from the country in recent years.

Wednesday, February 19

COVID-19 has infected over 75, 000 people around the globe. The death toll has now surpassed the 2 ,000 mark.

Around 14, 555 people have recovered from the infection.

United Nations Secretary -General Antonio Guterres said the COVID-19 outbreak is not yet out of control, but it has become a “very dangerous situation”.

Russia is to suspend entry of Chinese citizens for employment, private, educational and tourist purposes from Thursday.

The 43-year-old Chinese patient who contracted COVID-19 and was treated at a National Infectious Disease Hospital was discharged this morning, having recovered fully. The patient was admitted on Jan 27.

Tuesday, February 18

COVID-19 has infected 73,332 confirmed cases while the death toll now stands at 1,873. Around 12,000 people have recovered from the infection globally.

Tedros Ghebreyesus, WHO chief, said data from China had helped form a “clearer picture of the outbreak” and that it appeared that four out of five people infected would recover.

“More than 80% of patients have mild disease and will recover, 14% have severe disease including pneumonia and shortness of breath, 5% have critical disease including respiratory failure, septic shock and multi-organ failure, and 2% of cases are fatal,. The risk of death increases the older you are,” he said.

Apple has warned of a shortage of iPhones due to factory closures in China.

Monday, February 17

COVID-19 has infected 71, 334 people in 29 countries and territories. The death toll now is 1,775.

The U.S. Government has evacuated more than 300 Americans from the Diamond Princess cruise ship in Japan, which has been quarantined for weeks. Canada, Italy and Hong Kong are also sending evacuation flights for their citizens.

Sunday, February 16

COVID-19 has infected more than 71, 000 people globally, mostly in mainland China. The death toll is 1, 770.

President Xi Jinping has said he knew about COVID-19 outbreak, despite international criticism against him, nearly two weeks before he first spoke publicly about it. In a speech he said that he had “issued requirements for the prevention and control of the disease” on 7 January.

A Chinese tourist who tested positive for the virus died in France. This is the first COVID-19 related death reported in Europe.

Saturday, February 15

The death toll in mainland China has risen to at least 1, 523 with 66, 899 confirmed infections from COVID-19.

China says over 1, 700 medical workers have been infected by COVID-19, of which six have died.

Egypt has announced its first case of COVID-19, marking the first confirmed instance of the virus in Africa.

Friday, February 14

The death toll in mainland China from Covid-19 has risen to at least 1, 488 with 51, 986 confirmed infections.

The WHO has said that a spike of 14, 000 Covid-19 cases in China yesterday (Thursday, 13) was the result of new counting methods and did not represent a significant shift in the outbreak.

Thursday, February 13

The death toll in mainland China continues to climb with 1, 113 deaths and 44, 653 infections recorded. Two deaths have been recorded outside mainland China - one in Hong Kong and one in the Philippines.

The UK has confirmed its ninth case of Covid-19, saying the latest patient - the first in London - had caught the virus while in China.

The WHO has cautioned against assuming when Covid-19 may have peaked or when it might end, saying it was “way too early” to say, even after a drop in the number of new cases recorded.

Pope Francis has prayed for victims of China’s coronavirus., calling it a cruel disease. “A prayer goes out to our Chinese brothers and sisters who are suffering from such a cruel disease,” the pontiff said during his weekly general audience at the Vatican.

Japan reported its first death from Covid-19. The victim is an 80-year-old woman living in Kanagawa prefecture, which borders Tokyo.

Wednesday, February 12

The WHO has officially named the novel coronavirus ‘Covid-19’.

The global death toll from Covid-19 is at least 1, 107 with 43, 101 confirmed cases.

Tuesday, February 11

The new coronavirus has killed a total of 1, 013 globally, the Chinese government confirmed this morning.  
The number of confirmed infections in mainland China stood at 42, 500 at the end of Monday.

Eight people have tested positive for coronavirus in the UK out of 1,114 tested. The UK Government has declared that the new coronavirus represents a serious and imminent threat to public health.

British Airways has extended the suspension of flights serving Chinese cities amid concerns over the spread of the virus.

Monday, February 10

The new coronavirus has killed 910 people globally, the vast majority in mainland China, and infected more than 40, 000 people.

Chen Qiushi, a citizen journalist who had been posting critical reports from inside Wuhan, went missing last Thursday. Police revealed he was forced in quarantine, sparking online pleas for his release.

A WHO team has left for China to assist with containing the novel coronavirus outbreak.

Sunday, February 9

The death toll from NCP has risen to at least 813. The last United Kingdom repatriation flight left Wuhan with over 200 passengers, including government officials and British nationals.

According to a study published in the medical journal JAMA, 41% of the first 138 patients diagnosed at one hospital in Wuhan, were presumed to be infected in that hospital.

China’s National Health Commission has given the novel coronavirus a temporary name: Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia, or NCP.

Saturday, February 8

The death toll from the novel coronavirus 2019-nCoV has risen to at least 805. The vast majority of deaths are reported from mainland China. Globally, the virus has infected more than 34, 400 across 28 countries.

The number of fatalities from the novel coronavirus 2019-nCoV has officially surpassed the deadly SARS outbreak of 2001, which killed 774 people and infected 8,000.

The WHO has said it will send an international team to investigate the outbreak in China, next week.

Friday, February 7

Li Wenliang, the Wuhan doctor who was targeted by police for trying to sound the alarm about the coronavirus outbreak in December, died from the infection late last night.

More than 7,300 people are currently quarantined on two cruise ships off Hong Kong and Japan after former passengers were confirmed to have the virus.

Thousands of medical workers in Hong Kong have been on strike for five days, demanding the government close all borders with mainland China and take further emergency measures against the virus.

Thursday, February 6

The death toll from the novel coronavirus has risen to 563. 73 people died from the virus in the 24 hours to midnight, China's National Health Commission said today.

Schools in Shanghai have been forbidden to open before the end of February, in a government effort to contain the novel coronavirus.

In the United States, 350 American evacuees from Wuhan have been placed under quarantine at two military bases in California, Reuters reports. This is the second batch of evacuees from Wuhan.

The figure brings to nearly 400 the number of people subject to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s first public health quarantine in 50 years.

Wednesday, February 5

The death toll from the novel coronavirus outbreak in China has risen to 490. The number of confirmed infections in China has risen to 24,324.

Wuhan has started a city-wide sterilisation campaign in an effort to curb the spread of the infection.

The Hong Kong health department has announced that 30 members of a cruise ship, carrying 1,800 people are showing symptoms of 2019-nCoV, including fever. The ship was docked in Hong Kong after it was refused entry to Taiwan.

Tuesday, February 4

Head of the World Health Organisation, Tedros Adhanom, has accused some wealthy countries of being “well behind” in sharing data on novel coronavirus cases, calling for more global solidarity to combat the virus.

France’s government joined the United Kingdom in warning against any non-essential travel to China and suggesting that all of its citizens in China leave while the new virus is still spreading.

The WHO’s chief of Global Infections Hazard Preparedness Silvie Briand says the UN health agency has teamed up with Google and other social media outlets to help fight an ‘infodemic’ about the viral outbreak.

Monday, February 3

The number of confirmed deaths from the novel coronavirus 2019-nCoV has risen to 361, exceeding the country’s death toll from the 2003 SARS outbreak.

Russia begins evacuating over 600 of its citizens from Wuhan and Hubei.

Chinese stock and commodity markets fall, as investors dump risky assets in response to rising fears about the outbreak.

Sunday, Feb 2

The first fatality outside China is reported from the Philippines. The deceased patient was a resident of Wuhan, China and had travelled to the Philippines where he began showing symptoms.

Three days after India first detects the novel coronavirus 2019-nCoV, a second case is reported from Kerala.

Saturday, February 1

Chinese national first detected with the coronavirus in Sri Lanka declared healthy by Health Director-General of the IDH.

Sri Lanka successfully repatriates students stranded in Wuhan, China. Students will be quarantined for two weeks at the Diyatalawa Army Camp.

The death toll from 2019-nCoV climbs to 258 in China.

Friday, January 31

At the conclusion of an International Health Regulations (IHR) Emergency Committee meeting, the WHO declared 2019-nCoV a public health emergency of international concern.

Thursday, January 30

India confirms first case of novel coronavirus - detected in a student returned from Wuhan, China.

The World Health Organisation has said, ‘the whole world needs to be on alert now. The whole world needs to take action and be ready for any cases that come from the epicentre or epicentres that are established’.

Death toll from the new coronavirus has climbed to 170 from 132 — a rise of 29%, overnight. Confirmed cases are now at 7,711. Mortality rate is about 2%.

The Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) has introduced a syrup and a powder made by the Indigenous Medicine Department to enhance immunity against all infectious diseases, including the new coronavirus. The products are available free of charge at all of the CMC’s 20 ayurvedic dispensaries.

Wednesday, January 29

The National Infectious Disease Hospital says the 43-year-old Chinese woman who tested positive for coronavirus in Sri Lanka is recovering.

Despite sustained effort, Sri Lanka has not yet received clearance to evacuate the 32 Sri Lankan students stranded in locked down Wuhan City.

A number of airlines have suspended flight to China over concerns relating to the novel coronavirus. British Airways, United Airlines, Air Asia, Cathay Pacific, Air India and Finnair among the airline that have stopped and reduced flights.

A family returning to the United Arab Emirates from Wuhan City has been diagnosed with the novel coronavirus. The virus has now spread to over 15 countries.

A Japanese plane evacuating citizens from virus-hit Wuhan, arrives in Tokyo.

Responding to a shortage of face masks, the government imposes a maximum retail price of Rs. 15 on disposable face masks and Rs. 150 on N95 masks.

Americans evacuated from Wuhan City, pass coronavirus health screening test upon returning to the U.S.

Tuesday, January 28

The death toll from the novel coronavirus now stands at 131 in mainland China. Over 200 are in critical condition while over 4,500 cases have been reported globally.

Archbishop of Colombo, Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith announced that if Sri Lanka’s measures to contain the novel coronavirus fails, the Archdiocese will make a decision on closing Catholic schools in the country.

Sri Lanka Embassy in Beijing reports that over 200 Sri Lankan students have left China. Sri Lankan embassy is in constant touch with the remaining 33 students in Wuhan City via WeChat.

The Chinese Embassy in Sri Lanka has advised Chinese tourists from areas affected by the novel coronavirus to postpone any trips they may have wanted to make Sri Lanka. Also advise nationals from affected areas already in Sri Lanka to change travel plans and avoid crowded places.

The Health Ministry introduces two hotlines to answer any questions the public may have about the new coronavirus: 0710170717/ 0113071073

Health Minister Wanniarachchi announces that all students arriving from Wuhan City, China will be quarantined at the Diyatalawa Army Camp for two weeks.

Government announces that twelve hospitals – the IDH, the Negombo General Hospital, the Gampaha General Hospital, the Kandy General Hospital, the Kalubowila General Hospital, the Karapitiya General Hospital, the Anuradhapura General Hospital, the Jaffna General Hospital, the General Hospital, the Kurunegala General Hospital, the Ratnapura General Hospital, the Badulla General Hospital and the Batticaloa General Hospital have been prepared to deal with any further cases of the infection.

Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi orders on-arrival-visa facilities for Chinese nationals temporarily suspended. Decision made to allow only passengers into the airport premises.

Monday, January 27

The Journal of American Medical Association article on the new coronavirus says, ‘so far, it appears that the fatality rate of 2019-nCoV is lower than that of SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV’. It adds the ultimate effects of the infection yet to be seen.

The Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations says it is working with the World Health Organisation and several other institutions to develop vaccines against the new coronavirus.

The Department of Immigration and Emigration has been placed under the Ministry of Defence.

All passengers arriving at the BIA from China are being sent through a specially designated gate as a precautionary measure to prevent patients infected with the novel coronavirus 2019-nCoV entering the country.

The President’s Office announces that a group of 21 Sri Lankan students in China have left for Sri Lanka. Says that those who arrive from China will be asked to attend regular medical screening.

The 22-member National Action Committee has been set up to prevent the new coronavirus from spreading in the country. The Action Committee, which comprises the Health Minister and senior Health, Pharmaceutical, Army, Civil Aviation, Epidemiology, Medical Research and Immigration and Emigration officers, will meet at 5 PM today.

The Health Ministry advises the public NOT to panic. The Ministry announces that those with flu symptoms should first visit doctor/ hospital for treatment and says that ONLY if referred for further testing AND tested positive will be moved to the National Infectious Diseases Hospital.

The Director-General of Health Dr Anil Jasinghe says the Chinese female was a tourist, who arrived in a group. She had developed the fever just before the group left Sri Lanka, which was when she was admitted to the IDH.

The first patient is reportedly a Chinese female who arrived in Sri Lanka from the Hubei Province, China and was admitted to the IDH with suspect 2019-nCoV. While initial tests had proven negative, further testing has proven positive with the virus.

BREAKING: The Health Promotion Bureau reports the first case of novel coronavirus 2019-nCoV in Sri Lanka. The Bureau says that authorities are responding fast and cautions against unnecessary panic.

Sunday, January 26

Tests carried out at the MRI have confirmed that the four people, including one Chinese, who were admitted to the IDH are NOT infected with 2019-nCoV.

Foreign Affairs Ministry announces the Sri Lankan embassy in Beijing has submitted an application to land a SriLankan Airlines aircraft in Wuhan city to airlift 32 Sri Lankan students and their family members stranded there.

President’s Media Division reports that steps taken to bring back 150 Sri Lankan students from Sichuan province in China through a special SriLankan Airlines charter flight within the next 48 hours.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa orders the formation of a National Action Committee to prevent the novel coronavirus 2019-nCoV from entering or spreading in Sri Lanka.

Saturday, January 25

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has instructed Foreign Secretary Ravinath Aryasinha and national carrier SriLankan Airlines to take necessary steps to repatriate the Sri Lankan students in Wuhan.

Meanwhile, at home, the Sri Lankan embassy in Beijing says it is prepared to evacuate 33 Sri Lankan students and their families — if the necessity arises — to protect them from the virus.

First cases of 2019-nCoV reported from Europe: France has confirmed that three patients have been diagnosed with the new coronavirus.

Two persons, including a Chinese woman, have been admitted to the National Institute of Infectious Disease (IDH) in Colombo on suspicion of being infected with the new coronavirus 2019-nCoV. Medical samples have been sent to the Medical Research Institute (MRI).

Friday, January 24

Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi has reassured the public that all necessary steps have been taken to prevent the 2019-nCoV from entering the island.

The Foreign Ministry announces that the Sri Lankan embassy in Beijing is closely monitoring the developing situation. Says the embassy has created a WeChat group to disseminate information to Sri Lankans living in Wuhan City, and is exploring the possibility of evacuating them.

Thursday, January 23

Wuhan City, shuts down public transport to contain the virus.

Sri Lanka has decided to install three thermal scanners at the Bandaranaike International Airport (BIA) to detect those running a temperature that could possibly be symptomatic of the novel coronavirus 2019-nCoV.

Monday, January 20

The World Health Organisation (WHO) decides to convene an Emergency Committee on January 22 to discuss the 2019-nCoV that is fast spreading in China (and which had by then spread to Thailand and Japan), under the International Health Regulations, a legal instrument that binds 194 countries to ‘prevent, protect against, control and provide a public health response to the international spread of disease…’.

Sunday, January 12

The Ministry of Public Health in Thailand reports a case of the virus that is now being called 2019-nCoV. This is the first time the infection has been detected outside of China.

Friday, January 10

In a little more than a week since the virus was detected, Chinese researchers are able to release genetic material of the virus after sequencing it in laboratories. Made public, this information allows potential study and development of a vaccine or treatment.

Saturday, January 4

The virus has infected over 40 people within a span of four days. Health authorities are unable to understand the cause of the illness.

Tuesday, December 31

The World Health Organisation (WHO) country office has been informed that clusters of an unknown form of pneumonia is being detected in Wuhan City, in Hubei Province, China.

Editor's Note—The term 'novel coronavirus' was updated to 'COVID-19' after the coronavirus was named.

Former Sri Lanka cricket captain Kumar Sangakkara, after recording a statement yesterday (2) over the match-fixing allegations, said the truth would be revealed once the investigations are complete.

Sangakkara provided a nine-hour long statement to the Special Investigative Unit (SIU) of the Ministry of Sports, over match-fixing allegations made by former minister Mahindananda Aluthgamage last month.

“I came forward to give this statement, especially because of the responsibility we have and the respect we have for cricket. Also because the right actions must be taken. Once this investigation is over, everyone will get to know about the veracity of Mahindananda Aluthgamage’s statement,” Sangakkara told the media, last evening.

The former skipper arrived at the Sports Ministry at 9 AM yesterday, after he was summoned on Wednesday (1). Sangakkara was captain of the Sri Lanka cricket team during the 2011 World Cup.

Meanwhile, Mahela Jayawardena who was vice-captain at the time, was also summoned before the SIU today (3) but later given another date.

Jayawardene arrived this morning despite being informed not to, and in a separate statement, explained his reasons for coming, reiterating his wish to see the truth revealed.

The allegations of match-fixing at the 2011 World Cup final between India and Sri Lanka, caused controversy in the country, resulting in a formal investigation by the SIU.

Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa referred to the scandal as “politically unimportant”, saying, “If we allow ourselves to be distracted and forget the broader picture even for a moment, the consequences could be disastrous.”

Meanwhile, head of the Board of Control for Cricket in India’s (BCCI) Anti Corruption Unit, Ajit Singh said yesterday, “I am surprised the issue has come up after 10 years. As per my experience, the more delayed the investigation, the more difficult it is to get the evidence.”

Earlier this week, former Sri Lanka Cricket Selection Committee Chairperson—and 1996 World Cup winning vice-captain—Aravinda de Silva and cricketer Upul Tharanga gave statements to the investigators.

Last month (June 24), a statement was recorded from former Minister Aluthgamage.

SSP W. A. J. H. Fonseka, Director of the SIU, speaking to the media yesterday, noted that once the inquiry is completed, the recommendations and findings will be referred to the Attorney General, who will decide whether to proceed further.

Former parliamentarian Namal Rajapaksa, expressed his concerns over summoning cricketers to provide statements, without any preliminary investigation conducted by the International Cricket Council (ICC).

“The ICC must investigate this. I have no faith in summoning cricketers to the CID over this matter because the initial investigation has to be conducted by the ICC and its anti-corruption body. Based on those results, we should take action. Summoning cricketers to the CID will only bring an unnecessary disgrace to the country,” he said.

Former parliamentarian Bimal Ratnayake also tweeted, questioning how fair it was to subject the cricketers to such treatment. ‘Kumar Sangakkara ‘Summoned’ to [the] Special Investigations Unit of the Sports Ministry. Special Investigations Unit of the sports ministry ‘Summoned’ to Mahindananda Aluthgamage's office in Nawalapitiya. Where is the ‘Fair Play’?’, he asked.

Members of the Samagi Tharuna Balawegaya also staged a protest outside Sri Lanka Cricket, against the harassment of Sangakkara and the 2011 cricket team yesterday.

More related stories here.

A series of arrests and the transfer of its chief due to allegations of collusion with drug traffickers has brought national attention to the Police Narcotics Bureau (PNB).

On Wednesday (1), Police announced that three special investigation teams have been tasked with probing the alleged links between four PNB officers and drug traffickers.

Deputy Inspector General of Police, (DIG) Ajith Rohana and Police Spokesperson Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) Jaliya Senaratne, during a special press conference said the special investigation teams were put on the job following the arrest of two civilians who had divulged information regarding the involvement of the four PNB officers.

Earlier today (2), twelve more PNB officers were arrested by the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) for selling a consignment of drugs to a trafficker. Among the arrested are a Inspector and a Sub Inspector attached to the PNB.

This is the second group of PNB officers arrested in the crackdown of corrupt officers.

On Monday (June 29), days before the investigation teams were appointed, four other PNB officers—a Police sub-inspector, two sergeants and a constable—were arrested and interdicted for the suspected involvement with drug traffickers. The officers are being held under detention orders until investigations are complete.

Police have also begun a hunt for a fifth PNB officer currently evading authorities. DIG Rohana and SSP Senaratne however, have refused to divulge more details of the suspect.

“The Sri Lanka Police will not be lenient regarding these crooked Police officers,” DIG Rohana stressed, however. “They will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.”

Preliminary investigations into the four interdicted PNB officers have led the Police to the discovery of nearly Rs. 31.2 million in cash buried at one of the suspect's residences.

Several vehicles belonging to one of the suspects have also been confiscated. Police believe these were used to smuggle narcotics.

Meanwhile, twenty sovereigns worth of gold jewellery and ten acres of land owned by the suspects have also been confiscated. DIG Rohana further noted that the assets of suspect officers will be seized under provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act.

Thus far, sixteen PNB officers have been arrested since the beginning of the crackdown a week ago.

As a result of the four arrests, head of the PNB, DIG Sanjeewa Medawatte's integrity has also come under question.

The Police Department on Monday (June 29) requested the National Police Commission to authorise the transfer of DIG Medawatte. The request was approved on the recommendation of Acting Inspector General of Police C. D. Wickremeratne on Tuesday (30 June) and DIG Medawatte was transferred to the Police Welfare Division in Kehelwatte.

DIG Medawatte was replaced by DIG G. K. J. Aponsu.

This controversial series of events has gained the attention of the Ministry of Defence.

Secretary to the Defence Ministry, Major General (Rtd.) Kamal Gunaratne issued a strict warning to senior Police officers representing all provinces, at a special meeting on Tuesday (June 30), to hold themselves responsible for effective crime control in their respective areas of responsibility.

“You need to curb illegal activities that are increasing at an alarming rate without heeding to forces that might influence you against it,” Major General (Rtd.) Kamal Gunaratne said.

“You should also protect the dignity of the uniform that you wear. No Police officer, from senior DIGs, DIGs to OICs in their respective areas of responsibility, can wash off their hands as they all are responsible for the increase in crimes rates in their areas,” he stressed.

The Millenium Challenge Corporation (MCC) grant from the United States government to Sri Lanka continues to fuel debate as both nations remain locked in unceasing deliberation over the issue.

On Monday (23), the US Embassy in Sri Lanka said the Sri Lankan government was still reviewing the proposal to the MCC Compact Agreement — “We understand the Government of Sri Lanka is reviewing the USD 480 million grant,” it said.

The statement came on the heels of, and contradicted, a decision by the Cabinet of Ministers to call off the agreement.

Cabinet Spokesperson Minister Dr Ramesh Pathirana told the media just two days prior (21), Sri Lanka would not sign the proposed grant, as the four-member committee that had reviewed it felt it was not suitable for the country.

The MCC, created by the US Congress in 2004, is an independent US foreign aid agency that provides grants to reduce poverty and generate growth in a country.

It selects countries through a ‘competitive’ process and prioritises the World Bank’s classification of low and low-middle income countries, based on per capita income.

Sri Lanka began negotiations with the MCC in 2004 under the Bandaranaike-Kumaratunge administration and was selected as eligible to develop a compact in 2016. The country's project proposals for the compact were submitted for consideration in November 2017 under the government of Maithripala Sirisena. It was approved by the MCC Board on April 25, 2019.

The MCC agreement was approved by the Cabinet of Ministers on December 18, 2019 —right after the 2019 Presidential election—but the deliberations of the review committee, appointed on January 1, 2020 has become cause for a much-heated debate and consequential delay.

Citing the review committee’s comments in the interim report handed over to Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, the current administration has demurred, saying it would need to obtain public and parliamentary approvals before moving forward. Several Fundamental Rights petitions at the Supreme Court and protests against the MCC agreement have also fueled public perception and debate on the topic of the MCC.

According to the publically available draft of the agreement, the MCC grant will be applied to two areas in Sri Lanka in the form of a transport project and a land project.

The transport project—worth USD 350 million—will seek to increase the efficiency and capacity of urban and provincial transport infrastructure in the Western, Central, Sabaragamuwa and Uva provinces by upgrading physical roadway networks, modernising traffic systems and introducing policy and regulatory reforms.

"These investments will reduce severe traffic bottlenecks, create safer, more reliable public transportation and lower the transport costs required to connect people and goods with booming markets," the US Embassy has said.

The land project—worth USD 67 million—is expected to increase the availability of spatial data and land rights information.

Focusing on the Central, North-Western, North-Central and Eastern Provinces, the project will help the government create an inventory of state lands, modernise methods of valuing lands, strengthen tenure security for smallholders, women and firms, and digitise deeds records so that they are less vulnerable to damage, theft and loss.

Through the projects, the agreement expects to benefit approximately 11 million individuals over a 20 year period.

There are two arguments posed against the initiation of the MCC agreement in Sri Lanka. The first claims that the MCC agreement will undermine the country's sovereignty and national security.

The MCC review committee’s interim report said there were, ‘clauses and conditions that would negatively affect the national goals/objectives, sovereignty as well as national security, along with sections and provisions that would be unfavourable for the Sri Lankan Constitution and the legal framework of the country, included in the proposed composite agreement and agreement of the programme implementation, as well as in the draft cooperate statute of the proposed company.’

The second argument lleges the project will render land owned by the Sri Lanka government available for purchase to the American government.

Minister and Co-Cabinet Spokesperson Bandula Gunawardana previously said, “This agreement was drawn up by the UNP according to its whims, without taking the interests of the country into consideration. We warned about this during the elections, and I translated the entire agreement into Sinhala and published a book based on it, so that people could understand the dangers of signing such an agreement.”

Both claims have been denied by MCC Resident Country Director Jenner Edelman, who said, “First, the US and the MCC will not buy, own any land under this agreement. It is illegal under Sri Lankan law for foreigners including Americans to buy or own land here. Second, MCC compact has no connection with the US military.”

On January 27, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Sri Lanka. By that time, the virus, which is believed to have had its origins at a wet market in Wuhan, China at the end of 2019, had already begun to spread to other countries—but there seemed very little to be overly concerned about: Just days before, the government had installed thermal scanners at the main international airport and the Epidemiology Unit of the Ministry of Health had warned vulnerable populations and the public of general precautions. A 22-member National Action Committee to combat COVID-19 had also been formed and the patient, who was moved to the National Institute of Infectious Diseases Hospital (IDH), made a full recovery and was discharged with much fanfare after close to a month of treatment and monitoring. Sri Lanka had successfully managed its first encounter with a deadly viral infection.

It was over a month later that the first local COVID-19 case was detected, followed closely by four more cases. Sri Lanka is now in its sixth month of COVID-19, and despite having emerged from almost two months of curfew during which all public activity was completely curtailed, new cases are still being reported.

For the purpose of visualisation, Roar Media has mapped out the last five months (January-May 2020) of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka. The illustrations and graphs draw a clear picture of how Sri Lanka reacted to a global crisis. From the origins of the outbreak and first local transmission to the lockdown and ongoing cluster identification—this is a visual depiction of the data.

The cluster of pneumonia of unknown etiology was first reported from Wuhan, in the Hubei province of China on December 31, 2019. Within the span of four days, over 40 people were infected—an early sign of the virality of the infection.

The first case of COVID-19 outside of China was reported in Thailand on January 13, 2020, when a tourist from Wuhan tested positive there. Cases were subsequently reported in Japan, South Korea, the United States, Taiwan and Nepal until it reached Sri Lanka—the 12th country to report a COVID-19 case globally.

January And February

Sri Lanka’s first patient, identified on January 27, was a 44-year-old Chinese tourist from the Hubei province, who had arrived with a group of other travellers.

By early February, Sri Lanka was in negotiations with Chinese authorities to repatriate local students stranded there as a result of a lockdown imposed on Wuhan and other cities in the Hubei province. The students were moved to the Diyatalawa Army Camp, where they underwent two weeks' quarantine before being allowed back home. On February 19, the Chinese patient made a full recovery and was discharged from hospital.

The first local case was reported on March 11. This patient, a 52-year-old tour guide, is believed to have contracted the virus from a group of tourists from Italy, to where the viral infection had by then spread to all regions.

Authorities immediately began contact tracing, rounding up close to 50 people and instructing them to self-quarantine. Within days the second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth cases were recorded—all of them contacts of the tour guide—marking the first cluster of patients in Sri Lanka.

By this time, the government significantly changed its strategy in combating COVID-19, ordering all locals returning from abroad quarantined and partially closing down the main airport on March 18. Until then, it had only been foreign returnees from the three countries identified as high-risk countries at the time, Italy, Iran, and South Korea that were quarantined.

Schools that were due to be closed for April holidays were closed early on March 13, and what began as a ‘holiday’ for non-essential businesses from March 17 -19 eventually led to a strict island-wide curfew on March 20, in which all travel was strictly prohibited and those violating arrested.

On March 23, the first local patient—the tour guide, made a full recovery and was discharged from hospital. The first casualties from the virus were also reported this month, on March 28 and 30. On March 31, 21 new cases marked a peak in numbers for that month.

Sri Lanka started this month with the third COVID-19 death: on April 1, a 72-year-old from Maradana died while receiving treatment at the IDH hospital. Four more deaths were reported that month, making April the month with most fatalities in the country.

The second major patient cluster emerged in Suduwella, Ja-Ela where a group of six who had been in contact with a COVID-19 patient, disregarded instructions to self-quarantine and acted as vectors for the viral infection. The group was arrested and moved to a quarantine facility, but by then the damage had already been done: the cluster expanded that month, and the area had to be isolated.

As a result of the Suduwella cluster, a third major cluster emerged, when a sailor who was deployed to round up those evading quarantine in Suduwella, Jaela, contracted the virus. The Welisara Navy Camp was isolated on April 23, as a result, and cases from the Navy continue to be reported. The Navy cluster is currently the largest patient cluster in Sri Lanka with over 200 personnel and 50 others who were in close contact with those infected counting among those affected.

It was also during April, that the fourth major COVID-19 cluster was detected among the residents of Bandaranayake Mawatha, Colombo 12. An asymptomatic patient who had returned from India had violated curfew regulations, and moved freely about the neighbourhood, as a result of which over 300 residents were moved into quarantine centres that month (this eventually increased to over a 1,000 the following month).

On May 11, after close to two months of complete curfew, the government gradually eased up on restrictions in order to restart the economy. The public allowed to return to work, under specific guidelines and restrictions, but despite the caution, cases continued to be reported. On May 4, 5 and 25 three more people died as a result of COVID-19, bringing total deaths from the viral infection to 10. However, by this time, Sri Lanka had also successfully negated community transmission and all-new cases—with the exception of one at the latter end of May—were being reported from within quarantine camps.

The country also saw the emergence of another major cluster in May. Many of the Sri Lankans returning on repatriation flights from other countries began to test positive while in quarantine at the 44 temporary quarantine camps set up at various facilities across the island. This month has recorded the highest numbers of cases thus far—137 on May 26, and 150 on May 27. (At present, 412 of the 467 returnees from Kuwait alone have tested positive for the virus).

On May 28, over 200 Navy personnel were also quarantined after a group of sailors occupying the Gafoor building in Colombo tested positive. These were absorbed into the larger Navy cluster that began in April. It is these two clusters—the foreign returnees and the Navy cluster that are still active in the country.

The graph above depicts daily cases, recoveries and deaths; numbers that fluctuated in the first five months of the pandemic. The significant spikes in daily cases (in red) represent five major ‘patient clusters’—while authorities reported 31 clusters between January and May, Dr Samitha Ginige of the Epidemiology Unit told Roar Media, “although Police have identified 31 clusters, the health authorities have recognised only five major clusters.”

The steady rise in cases that peak on March 17 represents patients from the first cluster—the ‘Italian cluster’. The minor spike on April 14 is the cluster from Suduwella, Ja-Ela, which is linked to the Navy cluster which emerged on April 27. The Bandaranayake Mawatha cluster is represented on April 20. May has two major spikes on May 26 and 27, when the repatriated returnee cluster was identified.

The graph also represents Sri Lanka’s total death count, which as of May 31 stood at 10.

Here, the red line indicates active cases from January to May 2020, which continues to grow. However, recoveries—which follows a little slower, is also rising. By the end of May, active cases and recoveries ‘meet’, which indicates a levelling of the COVID-19 cases in the country—the numbers of those recovering is gradually increasing and will potentially, as the number of active cases decreases, overtake the number of active cases.

When compared to many countries in the world, and despite some delayed decisions, pushback and controversy, Sri Lanka has fared remarkably well in managing COVID-19. However, the success of the first five months of the year should not be a reason for complacency. Any negligence on the hands of the authorities or the public could lead to a second wave. The threat from COVID-19 is still very real and will be present for as long as it takes to develop a vaccine for it. This should not be forgotten.

All data was primarily sourced from the Epidemiology Unit of the Ministry of Health. Auxiliary data was obtained from and the Health Promotion Bureau.

The cumulative number of COVID-19 cases include all cases reported from January to June. Each graph is an independent depiction of COVID-19 cases during the relevant month. The graphs cannot be compared side by side. Instead, a summary of daily cases (from January to May) has been included.

Sri Lanka’s confirmed cases are recorded as confirmed following a Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test. The daily cases include both symptomatic and asymptomatic cases.

The cases, recoveries, and deaths are recorded as reported on the relevant date by the Ministry of Health.

Cover: Roar Media/ Jamie Alphonsus

Roar Media prides itself on producing original, refreshing, and thought provoking content which aims to capture the vibrancy of the South Asian region.

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On 19 April, a private hospital in Pannipitiya, some 16 kilometres south of Colombo, was temporarily shut down after one of its patients tested positive for COVID-19. Sixty-nine staff members including doctors, nurses, and assistants were promptly quarantined.

This decision had unintended consequences: a group of kidney disease patients who receive regular dialysis at the hospital were left stranded with no means of hospital care.

“All the other private hospitals refused to take us in. Government hospitals said that they could only accommodate some of us for a short period of time,” Suneth Liyanage, the son of one patient, told Roar.

The curfew and its travel restrictions made it difficult for many with weak immune systems and non-communicable chronic illnesses requiring regular medication or check-ups to seek essential medical attention. The 52-day lockdown only exacerbated their situation.

Asoka—Liyanage’s father—is a 68-year-old retired school principal. He was diagnosed with terminal kidney disease and began his renal replacement therapy or dialysis treatment seven years ago. He must receive treatment twice every week, with a two-day interval between each session. But Asoka was unable to access regular treatment after the private hospital was closed down.

“There are 47 kidney patients who received their dialysis treatment from the hospital that was shut down. And there are over 100 others who would make periodic visits to the hospital for the service. All of them were refused hospital care when they disclosed that they were treated at the Pannipitiya hospital,” Liyanage said.

Kidney patients—especially those suffering from chronic kidney disease of unknown aetiology— require continuous dialysis treatment aside from other medication. This makes it almost impossible for these patients and their primary caregivers (mostly their families), to go into home quarantine and deal with the limitations brought about as a result of the curfew.

Even though the government announced guidelines that clearly stated that patients should receive their dialysis as per usual, Asoka Liyanage and the group of other kidney patients known to him were still left vulnerable.

“My father had trouble breathing. He was supposed to have his treatment on 21 April, but couldn’t,” Liyanage told Roar on Thursday (23 April). “We [only] received an appointment at another hospital on 26 April, because that hospital can only accommodate three kidney patients per day. How could I let my father suffer for that long?”

Kalani\* (60) is a retired teacher, who was diagnosed with stage three ovarian cancer last October. Since then, she has had to visit the hospital every two weeks for a checkup. However, when variations in blood reports—which can happen quite often as a result of the chemotherapy drugs—are observed, she is asked to see her oncologist immediately.

With the curfew in place, however, she found this a difficult task. This was despite the fact that the Sri Lanka Medical Association issued a set of guidelines for hospitals to manage cancer patients during the curfew, with the objective of allocating limited available resources to all patients during the crisis.

“Since we could not go to the hospital regularly and only when it was a necessity, my mother’s oncologist advised us on what to do at home,” Kalani’s daughter, Janithri\* told Roar.

Kalani underwent a scheduled chemotherapy session in the second week of the lockdown. “After a chemotherapy session, she would have had to be vaccinated to control her systems—which she normally receives at the hospital. But we couldn’t do that this time because her oncologist told her not to come to the hospital,” Janithri said.

Celine De Andrado is 78-years-old and takes medication for diabetes and vertigo while also recovering from pericardial effusion.

“A pericardial effusion is when the area around your heart gets filled up with liquid and compresses the heart,” Celine’s grandson, Mahesh told Roar. “So if you do any strenuous activity it leads to laboured breathing and dizziness because the heart is constricted from pumping blood.”

Since March, De Andrado has been complaining of a swelling in her legs. Her doctor changed her medicine and assured her that there was nothing to worry about. But the medicine she was prescribed worsened her vertigo and she gradually lost her appetite.

“During the height of the lockdown she complained that the swelling had returned, on top of her vertigo. We called Medi-calls and a doctor showed up around an hour later,” De Andrado said.

De Andrado was lucky, with private emergency medical services such as Medi-call being accessible and showing great proficiency. The doctor proceeded to inspect her, speaking to her in a kind, calming tone and prescribed a different dosage to her medicine.

Even when it came to procuring her medicine, she managed to contact their regular pharmacist who had recently set up a delivery system. “All we had to do was send a list of medicines required and attach an image of the prescription if it was required,” he said.

Not all cases were similar, however.

“Since the hospital told us that regular visits would have to be reduced, we had to buy the vaccines and keep it in our fridge,” Janithri said. With curfew in place and unable to travel to hospital as frequently as she needs to, Kalani now receives her vaccines with the help of a retired nurse in the neighbourhood. “She is our neighbour. When she heard about my mother’s condition she agreed to help us.”

In Asoka Liyanage’s case, a solution came after a massive public outcry.

Six days after the shutdown, on 24 April, the private hospital was reopened and Liyanage was among the first to take his father in to receive his dialysis.

Speaking over the phone, he said that he had left his father at the hospital and had come to sleep for a few hours. He had barely slept during the last couple of days. “My father is finally receiving the treatment. He suffered, with us alongside him, for so many days. The other patients have also been given immediate appointments to receive dialysis. I am so glad this is over now,” he said with relief.

—\* Names changed on request

Cover: Ed Kashi/VII

Vega Innovations has come up with another new invention, this time to help prevent the spread of #COVID19

During most crises, the effects felt are uneven. The repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic have been twofold; a direct result of the crisis as well as the state's response to it. While the lockdown has been a measure implemented to mitigate the threat of COVID-19, it has produced unintended consequences and circumstances that are yet to be addressed.

In Sri Lanka, the efforts to control the spread of the viral disease, implemented since March, have challenged the livelihoods and lives of several vulnerable groups. It has already created casualties of an extended curfew period for whom ‘staying at home’ can mean unbearable pangs of hunger or abuse behind a closed door. The casualties are not just economical but also physical, social, and emotional.

At Roar Media, these stories have been—and continue to be—shared and recounted on our social media. Here we compile and curate, providing a brief snapshot into the lives of many.

Gamini Indralal (55) drives a garbage truck for the Kotte Municipal Council. “We are essential workers, so we have to work during curfew too,” he said, washing his hands with a bar of soap which he now carries around, after the COVID-19 outbreak.

Equipped with the mandatory face mask and gloves, Indralal and his fellow workers are on duty, working their respective garbage collecting routes. “Our salaries are paid. The cleaners are also showing up for work,” he said.

“When the lockdown was announced, I could have gone home to Kurunegala where my family lives,” Indralal said. “But I chose not to. It’s better to stay in Colombo. We get food and a bed to sleep in. And I send money to my family. It’s not so bad.”

“Most families who employ domestic workers do so to help them with their own workload. Now, with everyone home, and finances uncertain, be it middle-class or lower-middle-class, the need for a domestic worker is less,” Menaha Kandasamy, founder of the Domestic Workers’ Union (DWU) told Roar Media.

After curfew was imposed, domestic workers could not travel to work, and many who reside at their employers’ houses were asked to return to their hometowns.

“No money means no food,” explained part-time domestic worker and President of the DWU, Sarasgopal Satyavani. “Even if they [food lorries] bring food to our area, everyone struggles to purchase something,” she said.

Domestic work in Sri Lanka is severely unrecognised and excluded from several labour laws. Although the union has been lobbying for laws that benefit the workers, Kandasamy fears that in the light of this crisis, the process will be delayed further. “The workers face not only short-term but also long-term consequences,” she added.

“In a situation where our employers themselves are struggling to keep their jobs, I do not know what kind of work will be there for domestic workers in the future,” Satyavani said.

The National Child Protection Authority (NCPA) has observed a rise in reports of child cruelty, following the COVID-19 lockdown.

“During this time that curfew has been in place, the NCPA’s 1929 hotline has recorded 352 complaints,” Professor Muditha Vidanapathirana, Chairman of the NCPA told Roar Media. Out of this, 152 complaints are of cruelty, where children are victims of physical and psychological trauma at their own homes.

While previously, complaints of abuse were not always restricted to domestic environments, reports during lockdown are different.

“Before the curfew, the NCPA received roughly 40 complaints a day, out of which four of them were cases of cruelty against children. What happened during the curfew month (17 March - 17 April) was a significant increase in that. We noticed that cruelty cases went up to six cases, out of the 10 complaints we received every day,” he noted.

Just during this period, the percentage of child cruelty cases reported to the NCPA have increased from 10 to 60 percent. It is likely that many more go unheard.

Shihan Fareed (47) is known to many as ‘Thilas’ in his village. Usually, he wakes up early in the morning to take his children to school, before starting his work driving his three-wheeler.

“Sometimes I get hires soon after, but at other times I have to wait for a while. Depending on the day, I can earn between Rs. 2,000-2,500 on average,” he said. “Sometimes more, sometimes less.”

These days, Thilas has no income due to the lockdown in place. He lives with his wife, four children, and mother. His oldest daughter’s husband (currently a trainee at the post-office, earning a small stipend) and child also make up the entire household. As the sole breadwinner, he has had to depend on donations and help from neighbours, friends, and relatives.

“We all live in the same village, and consider ourselves one and the same,” he said.

Sarath\* (62) is a labourer attached to the Kotte Municipal Council. He was paid his last salary by his employer, but other benefits and overtime payments had been cut off. “The first week of curfew was really difficult. We were supposed to receive aid from the naghara sabha (municipal council) but we didn’t,” he said.

As an essential worker attached to the Municipal Council, nowadays he occasionally gets called into work, without any remuneration. He also used to clean houses regularly in order to earn some extra money. After the lockdown, however, this too has come to a halt.

Sarath and his wife live in Bandaranaikepura, Rajagiriya. Their son, Malith\*, told Roar Media that it was impossible for his parents to buy anything even when the food lorries started coming in. “Whenever the lorries came it would only go to some houses. By the time it reached us, everything was over,” he said.

However, things changed over the next few weeks, and goods were made available to everyone.

“Right now it’s manageable,” Malith said.“But what happens when we run out of money? How are we going to buy anything from the lorries? There are so many families in Bandaranaikepura who are already facing this situation. If the lockdown continues, what is going to happen when my family has no money to buy anything?”

Nimali Jayawardana (83) receives two pensions, both of which belonged to her late husband. One is for his service as an officer in the Sri Lanka Army. The second, for his work at the United Nations office in Sri Lanka.

“On a normal day, amma would receive her first payment to the post office and the other one would be deposited to her bank straight away,” Jayawardana’s daughter, Crishanthi told Roar Media. “This time, it was different.”

Due to the lockdown in place, the Sri Lankan government implemented a strategy to hand-deliver the payments to retirees and their families via postal officers on 2 and 3 April. “Amma received that payment, from which we purchased her medicine. But it was not enough and she has a doctor’s appointment coming up soon. We were hoping to receive the other pension allowance as well, but we don’t think it will arrive anytime soon,” she said.

“The first few days of curfew were really difficult,” Mala\* (27), a factory worker at the Katunayake Export Processing Zone, told Roar Media. “I kept wondering if the food we have in our room was enough, but I was grateful that we had water to drink,” she said.

When curfew was first imposed, among the many stranded away from their hometowns were workers employed at garment factories, living in boarding houses within EPZs.

A week after, transport was provided for these workers who wished to travel back home. Some chose to stay behind and since then, have returned to work amidst the lockdown.

Currently, a few factories have reopened, after adopting new safety measures against the COVID-19 crisis. Mala is waiting to hear back from her company so that she can go back to work. “I was paid for March and April, but was told that May depends on my willingness to come into work,” she said.

However, not all workers have continued to receive a salary. They wonder about the months to come, as they form an integral part of the country’s apparel sector—estimated to be one of the hardest hit in the current economy. Tap the link in our bio to learn more about the uncertain wage of factory workers, in Sri Lanka.

Ever since the COVID-19 curfew was imposed, non-profit organisation Women In Need (WIN) has observed an increase in domestic violence reports. With over 450 calls and an increase in new callers, 75 percent of calls received are from victims of domestic abuse.

“Domestic violence is not a new issue. But, where there is a curfew, with financial and social pressures, children at home, and no travel—it is worse when you are locked in with an abuser,” Project and Legal Manager of WIN, Mariam Wadood told Roar Media.

In addition to counselling services, WIN works with the Police to intervene and when possible, transport victims to three shelters in Matara, Batticaloa, and Colombo. However, the organisation faces challenges of its own; with travel restrictions, limited number of shelters, and a law enforcement directed at tackling the COVID-19 crisis. In addition to reports of domestic abuse, the organisation receives calls asking for rations, general assistance, legal advice, custody-related queries and reports of cyber harassment.

Wadood pointed to how stereotyped roles of men and women play a large role in the rising trend of domestic feuds and violence. “There are expectations of each gender, for example, the women must cook and clean, and these roles are not flexible,” she said.

She also noted that at a time where violence against women is exacerbated, the availability of only an ad-hoc system to support victims of abuse becomes more pronounced.

Ramanathan (50) is from Kandy, but owns and manages his own cut-piece textile shop located on Negombo Road. It is his main source of income to support his family who lives back in Kandy.

He used to visit them occasionally whenever he could catch a break. But ever since the COVID-19 curfew began, he has not been able to travel home and has been confined to his shop. It was during this time that he decided to start stitching masks and gloves using the material he had stored at the shop. His son too has been assisting him, and with the shop closed for sale, he thought this could generate an income for the both of them to survive on.

Ramanathan also felt that by selling these items at a reasonable price where there is a demand for it, he would be providing a service to the community. With permission obtained from the Police, he managed to set up his three-wheeler to sell his products to the public.

People travelling along the Negombo Road stop by to buy these masks and gloves from him. He also sells braided ropes which are used to hold down goods when transporting. According to Ramanathan even the little money he makes out of this, he is unable to send to his family due to his banking limitations. He has registered with the Police with the hopes that they will soon allow him to travel to see his family.

Report by Nazly Ahmed

For some citizens in Beruwala, water comes in short supply for half a year. “During the sunny season we don’t receive water,” resident Sharmila\* (19) told Roar Media. Even though Sharmila is currently in Colombo, she communicates regularly with her family who has been struggling to receive water.

During the drought season, some houses in the neighbourhood open their private wells for others to use. However, after the COVID-19 pandemic, most neighbours have stopped allowing others to come into their homes. “They tell us that we might bring in the virus,” she said.

Usually, the community works together to arrange a water tank at a specific location for everyone to use. “When this happens, we can get around 10 litres of water to our houses by paying a three-wheeler to bring it for around Rs. 200-250. Alternatively, we can walk and go, though this takes around two hours or more,” she told Roar Media.

“After the curfew was imposed, some members of the community began working together to distribute four litres to each house. But we are expected to make this last for four days,” she said.

The majority of Sharmila’s neighbours are daily wage earners. “Initially they did not receive essential food items and most ate half a jackfruit for each meal in order to survive,” she said. “Now things have improved with some receiving rations, though not all. The main issue is securing a steady flow of water, which remains unresolved.”

On 17 April, nearly 300 homeless individuals in Gunasinghepura, Pettah were taken to quarantine centres outside Colombo, after fears of COVID-19 spread through the area. The programme led by the Police and public health officials saw the group of homeless being disinfected and washed before being transported to the centres. New clothes and food were also distributed among the 300 men and women, who usually engage in begging.

Many of them later tested positive for COVID-19. Those who had contracted the disease were immediately sent in for treatment. The others, after completing the quarantine period, faced the conundrum of having no home to return to.

“I received a call from the Department of Social Services of the Western Province asking if we would be willing to take in a group of homeless elders who were quarantined in Mullaitivu,” Sanath Munasinghe, founder of Shelter4Homeless—a privately funded shelter for homeless senior citizen—told Roar Media.

“They were begging on the streets when they were taken to quarantine. And now they have no home to return to. Our institution agreed to take 10 of them, provided the state fulfilled some requests,” he said.

According to Munasinghe, since the COVID-19 lockdown, private run homeless shelters have faced complications due to diminishing stocks and the inability to transport or properly care for their residents. “We have 17 homeless elders under our care at the moment (without the group from Gunasinghepura) and we mostly work with private donations,” he said. “If one of the residents had fallen ill, we would not have been able to take them to the hospital because of the curfew. Apart from that, there has been little to no help from the Social Service Department until now.”

Munasinghe noted that the Department has agreed to support the shelter whenever residents require medical attention. Similarly, the Department would also be responsible for arranging funeral arrangements at the cost of the state, in the case of a death.

“During the COVID-19 crisis, restrictions were placed prohibiting visitors, and inmates were not allowed to receive additional necessities such as soap, clothing, sanitary napkins, etc.,” President of the Committee to Protect the Rights of Prisoners, Senaka Perera told Roar Media.

On 21 March, a riot at the Anuradhapura prison resulted in the death of two inmates while six were injured. Reports have been mixed; some claiming the prisoners were protesting visitor restrictions and others stating that tensions were due to suspicion an inmate had tested positive for COVID-19.

Overcrowding in Sri Lankan prisons is not a new issue. 2018 Prison Department Statistics reportedly\* estimated overpopulation at a whopping 73.3 percent — a large number of these pre-trial detainees.

In March, activists called for eligible prisoners — arrested for minor crimes or those awaiting trial — to be released on bail. They also asked for particularly vulnerable prisoners, like women with children, the elderly and the sick to be released on bail.

Assessing the situation, the government released over 2,900 prisoners on 5 April on bail.

“The prisoners receive their basic needs,” Perera said. He said, however, that the current crisis had prevented them from receiving small but important benefits and exacerbated existing structural issues within prisons and the criminal justice process.

There are 374 child care institutions in Sri Lanka, managed by the provincial commissioners of the Department of Probation and Child Care Services (DPCCS).

“Approximately 12,000 children live in these institutions,” DPCCS National Commissioner Chandima Sigera told Roar Media.

“Among the many problems the department had to deal with was the lack of food and essential goods after the lockdown,” she said, explaining that some department officers were unable to procure curfew passes to travel between districts for their work.

“But whenever these matters came up, we worked together and resolved them,” she said.

The Department also received reports of various charity frauds committed by unscrupulous individuals wanting to make money off this situation. The fraudsters would collect public monies under the pretext of helping the child care institutions—without the knowledge or sanction of the DPCCS.

“We ask the public that while donating to children is a valued effort it would be best to verify beforehand,” she said. “There are so many scams like this out there, where people ask for money to be donated to orphanages, but the child care homes never receive them.”

These frauds are under Police investigation.

Farmers, bee-keepers, kithul planters — these are just some of the people affected greatly by the curfew that was imposed as a result of COVID-19.

A group of young greenhouse farmers from Welimada, Uva Paranagama, Bandarawela, and Hali-Ela said the curfew had prevented them from selling their produce.

The farmers are part of a Department of Agriculture-led programme that provides concessionary loans to build greenhouses and cultivate tomato, cucumber, and bell peppers.

“Before the COVID-19 crisis, a kilo of tomato was sold at Rs. 130-140, a kilo of cucumber at Rs. 200 and a kilo of bell pepper at Rs. 850,” Gunadasa, a field officer overseeing a number of the farming projects in the Uva Province told Roar Media.

“But during the lockdown, we couldn’t even sell a kilo of bell pepper for Rs. 30. No one bought the harvest.”

He explained that 100 farmers are participants of the programme, of which 59 had received loans and 35 had used it to cultivate their first season when the curfew came into effect.

Although agriculture was not prohibited during curfew, the farmers found it difficult to sell their crop to the local market.

“Our farmers faced a desperate situation,” Gunadasa said, explaining that these crops were typically sold to a different clientele at supermarkets.

With wholesale marketplaces in central areas and other economic centres scattered across the country temporarily shut down, farmers began selling their produce on the roadsides.

In April, the government intervened and purchased over 700 metric tonnes of vegetables sold by roadside vendors.

L. K. Priyantha (49), is the Managing Director of Lanka Eco-Products, and oversees 500 kithul treacle producers, 350 mushroom farmers, and 300 beekeepers — all of whom, he said, were unable to sell their produce during the curfew.

“Our main clientele were cake-makers, wedding receptions, and hotels. But now with everything being cancelled our sales have dropped immensely,” Priyantha told Roar.

“We had to resort to new ways to deal with the situation such as implementing a mobile unit that would go around selling the produce.”

“Even after the curfew, we still face trouble selling our products because people only buy what is necessary,” he explained further.

Mohamed Faris is a building contractor who lives in Panadura. He usually undertakes contracts from his hometown as well in areas nearby such as Dehiwela and Mount Lavina. However, during the COVID-19 curfew all of his construction projects were halted.

Out of options to support his family, he began selling essential food items. Having obtained permission to transport goods in his three-wheeler, he began making visits to the Pettah and Manning Market almost three times a week to purchase everything that he needed.

He would then sell them at a reasonable price to the people in his neighbourhood.

"I can't sell with a big profit margin,” he said. “I should be reasonable at a time like this. And after all the costs are counted, I am left with a very small amount. But it keeps me going.”

Report by Nazly Ahmed

With medical resources exhausted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, access to general healthcare has been a struggle—in particular for many with chronic illnesses.

Asoka Liyanage (68), a kidney patient, was left stranded with no access to regular dialysis when his usual private hospital was shut down after a false COVID-19 scare in April.

“All the other private hospitals refused to take us in. Government hospitals said that they could only accommodate some of us for a short period of time,” his son, Suneth told Roar Media.

“My father had trouble breathing. He was supposed to have his treatment on 21 April, but couldn’t,” he said. It took six days for authorities to reopen the hospital and offer services to the patients: that too, only after a massive public outcry.

With primary attention diverted towards containing and treating the novel coronavirus, patients suffering from diabetes, cancer, and other chronic illnesses have had to adapt to the current situation.

Ponnambalam Udhayakumar (45) started fishing at 15 years old, with his father. Thirty years later, he still goes out to sea to earn a living. Only a small percentage of the income is kept for himself, and the rest is spent on the boat he hires.

Although no restrictions were placed on fishing during the COVID-19 pandemic, the livelihoods of many fisherfolk were nevertheless severely affected.

Udhayakumar told Roar Media he was not able to sell his catch to his usual customers or wholesale purchasers because no one came to buy them. “I had to sell everything I caught at a very low price by the side of the road. It was not even close to the income I received before,” he said.

According to Udhayakumar, a kilogramme of any type of fish could be sold at Rs. 400. But during the curfew, this dropped to almost half, making it very difficult for him to make ends meet.

While Udhayakumar is away at sea, pushing off from the Trincomalee Bay almost every day, his wife tends to the household and their children’s needs. But with insufficient income from fishing, he has had to seek additional work elsewhere.

“[Because] the situation was so dire, I started undertaking small labour work. One person wanted help with the house they were building, so I became a mason’s assistant. The other time, I managed to clear some land for money,” he said.

Udhayakumar and many others like him were recipients of the Rs. 5000 allowance distributed by the government as relief during the lockdown, and he says the money was a respite from having to work menial jobs for a pittance.

“But we don’t know if we’ll get the money in the future. So I’m looking forward to going back to work,” he said.

“My work involves sitting on a chair for long hours in the night. I sleep in a small room the company has given me. That’s during the day, of course,” chuckled Mani\* (52), a night guard at a restaurant in Colombo.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Sri Lanka and businesses closed down indefinitely, security guards and night watchmen like Mani were among the few still working.

Even though many of those who continued to be employed opted to find a hostel or temporary boarding facilities in the city, Mani said he could not afford it. “I would have to spend half of my salary on the hostel,” he said. “I wouldn’t be able to send any money home. Here [in the security post], even if the room is small, I can manage. I get my food and sleep. I send money to my family.”

Mani had also initially planned to go home for the Sinhala and Tamil New Year in April. But with curfew imposed, he could not. “I haven’t been home in three months now,” he said.

Meanwhile, Siva\* (58) who is one of three guards at a shopping centre in Colpetty lives at a hostel. “There are 18 others who stay here,” he said.

When the lockdown was initiated, the private security company that employs Siva cancelled all holidays for its employees. Siva said the company provided face masks and gloves to all staffers, as well as thermal scanners. At the hostel, they maintain distance from each other and have been instructed to use our own cutlery and to keep them clean and sanitised at all times.

“We were paid our salaries and were given rations to cook our food. If we were at home, we would not have an income. We would not have been paid. So we managed to live through the lockdown,” he said.

\*—Name has been changed.

While the unexpected disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused grief to many, vulnerable populations and communities remain the hardest hit. Sumithra\*, an amputee told Roar Media how hard she found it to go about her daily routine, even after the lockdown was lifted.

“I wear a prosthetic leg,” Sumithra said. “At supermarkets and other places, I’m expected to wash my hands using a station that is operated by foot. How am I supposed to do that?”

Marginalised even before the pandemic, the disabled community was significantly challenged during the lockdown.

“Visually-disabled persons who sell items by the side of the road, such as handicrafts and lotteries, to earn a living—they all lost their livelihood during the lockdown,” Rasanjali Pathirage, head of the Disability Organisations Joint Front (DOJF) told Roar Media. She added that the absence of a proper government database has made it impossible to ensure everyone received aid during this time.

Many of those disabled—most already dependent— had to lean further on volunteers, community supporters and rights advocates to survive.

Nalinda Nagolla, the Managing Director of the DOJF told Roar Media that over 2,000 persons from the community had problems buying food and dry rations and that approximately, 1,500 persons—mostly hearing-impaired—did not even receive the Rs. 5,000 allowance given by the government.

“Around 60 people suffering from physical disabilities—mostly, wheelchair-bound—couldn't obtain their medicine and equipment,” Nagalla added. “Many didn't even receive the aid and donations that were distributed because it was hard for them to stay in a queue to collect them.”

The DOJF, communicating through social media or online messaging platforms such as WhatsApp or IMO, managed to compile a database of complaints that were brought to the attention of the Presidential Task Force for Economic Revival and Poverty Eradication, which intervened to provide aid.

But although many of the complaints have been addressed after DOJF intervention, the disabled community continues to face challenges. “Even though the lockdown has been lifted, many are yet to receive their compensation. Funds approximately worth Rs. 290,000 have been allocated to provide aid, but they are yet to receive it,” Nagalla said.

“We had no hires after the COVID-19 curfew was imposed,” Sisira\* said.

Sisira, who works for an online food delivery platform is usually on the road for up to 16 hours a day, including on the weekends. But the COVID-19 lockdown completely dried up his source of income.

“It was quite difficult because we earn by the day and have little savings,” he said.

A father-of-three, Sisira and his family managed with what little savings they had. The company he works for also deposited a small percentage of his usual monthly earnings in his bank account, making things a little easier.

But managing those months under lockdown was still a challenge. “Food was the main problem,” he told Roar Media. “We had to think a lot about what we purchased.”

Food delivery apps have become quite popular in Sri Lanka. Delivery persons whizzing past in brightly-coloured jackets in all types of weather is now a common sight.

“We are quite used to the rain,” Sisira laughed. “Our main focus is on protecting our phones!”

Sisira returned to work when curfew was eased but has noted a low turnout of delivery persons, or ‘riders’ as they are known, as many have returned to their hometowns as a result of the lockdown.

Very few orders were also being placed, he said. This meant a smaller income than usual each month.

At work, Sisira’s temperature is checked regularly. He is given hand-sanitiser, a reusable face mask and educated on health guidelines he should follow.

‘Contactless delivery’, a new feature that allows the delivery person the option of leaving the food at the doorstep and moving away before calling to inform the customer, has also been gaining popularity, he told us. “But in some cases, there is no place to keep the food, even though contactless delivery has been requested, I can’t keep it near the drain!” he said.

Drivers are also now often held up at restaurants which are running on minimal staff, he added. Curfew that is still in place (between midnight and 4 AM every day) means that riders who previously had the option of working until 2-3 AM to earn extra have not been able to do so.

With limited opportunity, Sisira also wonders how he will fare the next few months, even as more riders return to work.

\*Name has been changed

Cover photo credits: Akila Jayawardana/ NurPhotos

It takes roughly 10 minutes to wear the entire ensemble; the complete outfit of any doctor or nurse tending to a patient who has contracted the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). It is cumbersome and confining. The outfit is also the primary protection for the health care workers who are at immediate risk of being infected themselves in this pandemic.

Dr Priyankara Jayawardana, a consultant physician, tested positive for COVID-19 after coming into contact with another patient on 20 March. He was treated at the National Infectious Diseases Hospital (IDH) for 11 days and then released. He wrote on his social media: “I came home yesterday evening. Two consecutive COVID PCR tests for the virus were negative.”

For every health care worker that contracts the disease, there is one less doctor or nurse available to help a patient. The only precaution is to gear up. However, with the unprecedented spread of the disease, the world is facing a dire shortage of protective equipment.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for health workers is at an all-time low in the world. In the United States, doctors and nurses facing the shortage are forced to wear bandanas and scarves for masks, trash bags for gowns, and reuse medical equipment — heightening the risk of COVID-19 infection and possible death.

The severity of the crisis is also felt in Sri Lanka too.

Video: https://twitter.com/WHOSriLanka/status/1243929314015375360?s=20  
A health worker donning the cumbersome PPE outfit. Video Credits: WHO Sri Lanka.

“At present, our daily consumption of PPE ranges from 2,000 to 2,500 kits at all hospitals and quarantine centres, treating or testing for COVID-19,” Dr Kapila Wickramanayake, Director of Medical Supplies at the Ministry of Health, told Roar Media.

Since the beginning of the outbreak to present, 30 hospitals have been compartmentalised to either test for suspected COVID-19 cases or treat those cases who were identified with the disease. One of the primary treatment centres is the IDH in Mulleriyawa, at which a single health care worker uses 10 to 15 PPE kits each day.

“This is an abnormal situation,” Dr Wickramanayake explained. “There was a huge increase in the demand following the outbreak, which has led to several minor issues — globally as well as locally. We are definitely feeling the impact of this. However, I believe we are managing and maintaining what stocks we have.”

One of the challenges that gained prominence during the initial stages of the outbreak was the shortage of medical masks in the market.

The demand for medical and surgical masks saw an unprecedented increase following the discovery of the first COVID-19 patient in the country back in January. Even though face masks were not mandatory at that time, many were seen panic buying and hoarding face masks in the following weeks.

While the stocks managed to support the increased demand for a few weeks, by February and March, the mask stockpiles had more or less depleted.

Proof of this arrived when Professor Neelika Malavige of the Dengue Research Centre of the Sri Jayewardenepura University and her team of virologists, who are testing biosamples for COVID-19 diagnosis, reported a shortage of N95 surgical masks.

“Since we handle biosamples from patients, N95 masks have become essential for us,” she said. “However, since people are misusing facemasks and surgical masks, there’s a shortage of it in the market. We would like to request everyone to use alternatives so that essential services such as the health sector can utilise it.”

There are two significant ways in which the curve can be flattened; one is to practice social distancing. This would reduce the number of those infected and the spread of the disease, and would not overburden the health workers. The second solution is to develop more capacity so that frontline workers can handle more cases at once.

If capacity falls — if doctors and nurses get sick because of a lack of protective equipment, or refuse to work without conditions that can ensure their safety — even the flattest curve would be hard for a system to handle.

As for medical supplies, Dr Wickramanayake of the MOH said, the purchase of PPE and other medical equipment is still underway, despite the various global restrictions on imports. “Regional institutions and local manufacturers have been of great help. There have been so many donations. Even megascale industries have become a part of this and are helping with manufacturing.”

The local manufacturing of PPE began with Dr Udaya de Silva of the Anuradhapura Hospital and his team designing a DIY-style PPE kit, inspired by garbage bags that collect waste, polythene sealer, aluminum foil with cloth iron and Teflon sheets with soldering iron.

After the design was put forward, large-scale production of the kits was undertaken by Sri Lanka Air Force and the Sri Lanka Army. Similarly, the designs were shared with private sector companies such as Brandix, Hirdaramani, and MAS Holdings and others in the apparel sector, which has begun the PPE production.

Many leading companies of the industry have also discovered the prospects of PPE and face masks manufacturing for export purposes in the current economy; incentivised by the Exports Development Board and the Sri Lanka Foreign Affairs Ministry.

According to Coordinator of the Disaster Preparedness and Response Division of the Health Ministry, Dr Hemantha Herath, Sri Lanka began preparing for pandemics and other unexpected emergencies back in 2018.

“With the increase in threats like the Ebola outbreak in 2018, we had our first emergency response programme. Following this, there were several other programmes that were held regularly. Then the Easter Sunday attack happened in April (2019). After that, the need for better response became obvious,” he said.

In order to successfully address the COVID-19 outbreak, the National Influenza Preparedness and Response Plan was utilised by the Health Ministry to successfully address the crisis. “What we had was a preparedness plan and a very generic action plan. Since COVID-19 is also a respiratory disease, like SARS, MERS, Avian flu, and H1N1, we made use of the influenza response plan. We had to modify it later on to suit the specific requirements of the disease,” he said

According to Dr Herath, these plans and strategies helped prepare the country's health sector to a certain extent.

“We did not have a crisis in the beginning. We had enough stocks of PPE and other equipment prepared beforehand, as part of the work plan of this division. Over 2,000 PPE kits were distributed last year to hospitals such as the IDH, the armed forces, and other organisations which were likely to be first responders. Because of that, when the COVID-19 crisis struck for the first time, we did not have to face any kind of major shortage in respect of protective equipment,” he said.

With the armed forces set to produce approximately 1,000 kits per day, Dr Herath is confident the country will face the shortage head-on. “Yes, everything was done for the first time and there were many setbacks. Looking back, we can spot the mistakes, the delays, and the panicked reactions. Yet, there was no major crisis because we were ready,” he affirmed.

Cover image courtesy of Akila Jayawardana

Online messaging platforms like WhatsApp, Viber, Signal, and Telegram have become pivotal sources of information in the digital age. While these platforms facilitate positive communication and create a sense of community, it is also a breeding ground for misinformation and disinformation that can cause confusion, at best, and physical harm or death, at worst.

This is particularly evident during national or global crises when there is a desperate need for information. At times like these, information is sometimes created and disseminated with the deliberate intention of misleading. These soon take on a life of its own as it spreads rapidly through communication networks.

Not all of it is with malicious intent however; some are simply created or shared with the best of intentions but have the potential to cause serious harm. We have seen this before, in Sri Lanka, and we’re seeing it again, globally, during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Take a look at some of the WhatsApp forwards we’ve included below–you may have seen, received or even shared these with your own peers.

COVID-19 currently has no cure. While many nations and companies are working on a treatment and a vaccine, the trials are yet to succeed.

The compounds mentioned in the message are very real and Dr Li Wenliang did attempt to call to attention the initial spread of the coronavirus and later died from it.

However, there is no verifiable information to prove that doctors in China are serving tea to COVID-19 patients, or more importantly—that tea is a cure for or will help reduce possible infection.

Just leave tea-drinking for your customary evening break.

Pro tip — Note the mix between fact and fiction: this makes it difficult for people to use a common-sense approach. Most resort to ‘forwarding as received’—an attempt at absolving responsibility for the veracity of the content, but that’s not enough. Take the time to research the information before you share it. Note the ‘Breaking News from CNN’ tag—get onto the CNN site, type in the keywords, and see for yourself if it is true.

Don’t believe us? Check AFP Fact-Check here.

While the link to the CNBC article is accurate, the content in the message is not.

The link explains that the World Health Organisation (WHO) is considering ‘airborne precautions’ for medical staff after a new study showed the coronavirus can survive longer than usual in the air in some settings.

The setting referred to were at medical care facilities where aerosol-generating procedures (procedures that stimulate coughing) are conducted on people with respiratory illnesses. In these settings, it would be necessary for healthcare workers to take extra precautions.

At no point in the article is there any indication that COVID-19 can remain in the air for eight hours. At no point has the WHO said everyone is required to wear masks everywhere—in fact, the WHO is very clear on who and how masks should be worn and has also advised the rational use of medical masks to avoid unnecessary wastage of the resource.

What has been established is that COVID-19 spreads from person to person when an active COVID-19 patient coughs or exhales and produces droplets that come into contact with another person.

Since the droplets are too heavy to be airborne, they land on people in close proximity or objects and surfaces that are then contaminated. Other people can become infected by touching these contaminated areas and then touching their eyes, nose or mouth.

This is why maintaining at least a metre distance from other people, and washing hands regularly for at least 20 seconds with soap and water or an alcohol-based sanitizer is encouraged.

Pro tip: Click on the link and read it carefully before sharing. Does it corroborate with what is being said in the ‘forward’? If it doesn’t, discard. If it does to some extent, you still may want to do some additional research and reading before sharing unverified information.

Don’t believe us? Read what WHO has to say about it here.

You do not have to wash your hands every 20 minutes. Instead, wash your hands with soap for at least 20 seconds, especially if you have; stepped out of the house, just coughed or sneezed, or have come into contact with another person—and most definitely if that person is already sick.

Secondly, hot water does not kill the virus, gargling with warm salt water or vinegar does not prevent infection, and clothes must be washed and dried—it is not a choice of one or the other.

Since most of these tips appeal to common sense it may be easy to assume all of it is factual and to share with as many people as possible—all with the intention of being helpful. But the wrong information can have dangerous unintended consequences.

There are documented cases of severe illnesses or even death as a result of drinking bleach, methanol, or eating copious amounts of garlic to prevent COVID-19. People may also believe these simple methods are enough to prevent them from contracting the virus and not take enough precautions.

Fact-check tip: Take time to study these claims. It may require more work than simply sharing it, but you would be doing your part at being a responsible citizen—remember you can help break the misinformation/disinformation chain.

Don’t believe us? All of this has been very effectively addressed in the WHO ‘Mythbusters’ section here.

This forward claims that the virus that killed over 3,000 people in China was engineered as a bioweapon and released to destabilise and allow China establish a firm foothold in the world.

The claim is seen as part of a disinformation campaign against China or as a conspiracy theory that has been debunked by many accepted publications.

If you’re still not convinced, here’s what Tom Inglesby, Director of the John Hopkins Center for Health Security had to say “... there isn’t any evidence that this virus has been engineered or is different from something that has been found in nature.”

Fact-check tip: Notice the claim that China had become the owner of global companies in China as a result of economic destabilisation? Do a little research and see if that is true.

Want further proof? Read what WHO has to say about the natural—and not constructed—origin of the virus, here.

Hydroxychloroquine sulfate is currently used for the prevention and treatment of malaria. Reports of the drug’s efficacy in the battle against COVID-19 began in South Korea, which recommended the drug after an experimental treatment.

Later in the United States, President Donald Trump claimed it showed “tremendous promise” in treating COVID-19 patients, despite the director of the country’s National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Dr Anthony Fauci saying the drug is yet to be considered for trials.

The drug made headlines in Sri Lanka as well, when Opposition Leader Sajith Premadasa recommended its usage. He later retracted his statement and issued an apology after a public outcry. Health authorities here also strictly instructed people not to buy or use the drug without medical advice and pharmacies were prohibited from selling the drug without a prescription.

Pro tip: It’s easy to get excited about a rumoured treatment for COVID-19—it’s even understandable that you may want to stock up on the drug, so that you are not left without when you need it. But as a rule of thumb, you should never take any medicine that isn't prescribed by a doctor, especially in evolving public health situations like these, when no clear medical solution has been discovered.

Want to know for sure? See what WHO has to say about it.

Steam inhalation is a common and effective way to clear your nasal passages if you’re sick with a cold or flu—but COVID-19 is not a common cold and steaming will not help a patient recover in ‘double-quick time’.

This sort of common-sense advice has appeal because it is uncomplicated and people feel it would do them no harm to steam, anyway. However, the damage is that it trivialises the potentially deadly nature of COVID-19.

Steaming will not prevent you from contracting COVID-19, either. At this stage, we know that social distancing and hand hygiene are probably the best way to do this. By sharing this sort of information you are endorsing an ill-informed view that could potentially cause harm to someone.

There is also no evidence that the doctors at the National Infectious Diseases Hospital (IDH) are inhaling steam.

Fact-check tip: Read and understand the severity of COVID-19. Does it seem possible that a virus that has spread so fast all over the world and claimed so many lives can be prevented by something so simple as steam inhalation—and if yes, why is it not being propagated as a solution more by health authorities? Nothing short of a conspiracy theory can prevent you from coming to the logical conclusion that a steam inhalation can’t be the solution to the virus. Why not use that as a stepping stone to find out what the experts are actually saying?

Don’t believe us? See what AFP FactCheck has to say about it.

As per the WHO, an ‘incubation period’ is the time between contracting the virus and showing first observable symptoms. An incubation period will vary from person to person—most estimates of this incubation period range from 1-14 days, with an average of five days.

This is why the government moved swiftly to put people who arrived in Sri Lanka into two weeks quarantine from early March onwards, where they are kept under observation for any developing symptoms.

Similarly, the government moved fast to round up those that may have come into contact with confirmed cases (contact tracing) and impose a 14-day quarantine period on them as well, during which they are watched over for symptoms.

While it is likely that a number of people will display symptoms at the same time—if they have come into contact with an active case within a similar time frame—it is not possible for everyone who has contracted the virus to develop symptoms at the same time.

For these reasons, it is clear that there was absolutely no truth to the claim that 23 March - 3 April is when the virus will ‘peak’. However, ‘forwards’ like this have the real ability to cause panic and fear and even instigate panic buying increasing the chances of people coming together and the risk of the virus spreading.

It can also lead to the mistaken belief that after ‘3 April’ the worst will be over.

Fact-check tip: It is safe to take these ‘forwards’ with a pinch of salt. Rest assured, if there was something to be worried about, the relevant authorities would have introduced measures and published informed statements. Follow authentic sources, instead of your WhatsApp forwards.

Want to know more? Click here.

These WhatsApp forwards are only a small sample of the fake news out there. Some are far more serious than others, and even purport to be from established and authenticated sources—so remember that even if you receive some information that professes to be from WHO, the United Nations (UN), the Sri Lankan government, or an established news website—it might not be necessarily true.

It only takes a few clicks to find out if the ‘forward’ you received is credible information. Go to the actual website. Does the WHO/UN/Sri Lanka government/News website say the same thing?

It is also good practice to have more than one established source corroborating the information — so even if one news source is propagating a certain bit of information, it is good to wait till several others say the same thing to establish that there is some truth to the claims.

Stick to established sources. It is not a good practice to get your news and information from gossip sites or less than reputable news sites. Always make sure you visit established websites for information.

In a world where citizens now have the power to create, hold, and distribute information—the public has an even larger role to play as consumers of the media.

If you cannot verify a piece of information with a reliable source, do not share it. You, more than anyone else, can break the fake news chain.

<Cover: The Financial Times>

For Osanda Samarasinghe (45), the highlight of April has been celebrating the Sinhala and Tamil New Year. He and his family would observe traditional nekath at the appropriate auspicious times, and before the New Year dawned, would shop for clothes and prepare and plan their finances for the upcoming year.

“We would renovate and repaint the house, make kavum, kokis, and aluwa. And on the day of the New Year, we would distribute it amongst our neighbours,” he told Roar Media.

This year’s Sinhala and Tamil New Year will kick off at the auspicious time of 8:23 p.m. on Monday (today, April 13). The auspicious time—or nekatha—for the first ritual of the New Year, which is to prepare the first meal, is at 10:05 p.m. also today. But this time, the New Year will not be celebrated with extended family and friends. It will take place within the confines of homes surrounded by only immediate family members.

On Thursday (April 8) the Ministry of Buddhasasana, Cultural and Religious Affairs urged the public to observe Sinhala and Tamil New Year rituals within their own homes, and in a subdued manner. The measures were aimed at preventing gatherings by continuing the social distancing policy the government had adopted as a strategy to contain COVID-19.

As a result, New Year uthsawa (festivities) and religious gatherings will not be permitted.

“We cannot celebrate, therefore we must adhere to nature’s orders. [This New Year] we are going to stay home and try to do some of these festivities as safely as possible,” Samarasinghe said.

“Normally, this would be the April holidays, meaning 10 days to spend time with family. This season, we have already spent a lot of days with the family, which is good,” he added with a laugh.

“But we will be missing a lot of things this year,” he said. “We can’t organise the games within the community, or exchange food with neighbours. This is rather sad.”

New Year for Kanthi\* (60) and her family ordinarily meant throwing a massive dinner party for her entire neighbourhood within a gated community in Ja-Ela. But not this year.

“Every year, our community comes together and we throw this avurudu party,” she told Roar Media. “Early in the morning, we exchange sweets. Later on, everyone meets at this plot of land within the housing scheme. We set up games and put out chairs and usually take part in a whole lot of events.”

The merriment would typically carry on late into the evening, Kanthi said. “We would then meet at one of the houses afterwards for the dinner party.”

It is not just the inability to prepare for the New Year as they ordinarily would by shopping for new clothes, making traditional sweets or putting up decorations that have affected many. A lack of supplies has led to frugality and many are aware they will not be able to prepare a feast as they ordinarily would for the holiday.

This year, Varushini Balasingam (31) and her mother have decided to forego celebrating the New Year this time. “We are in Colombo, so we receive some supplies but there are families who do not get the same, who have only one meal a day, and are struggling,” Balasingham said.

“We can’t buy new clothes or step out. So, instead of celebrating, we thought of seeing how we can help those in need. We are in the same country and in the same situation. We should also think about the COVID-19 patients during this time,” she said.

Sisira (63) owns a small store on a byroad in Udahamulla. One of the few shops allowed to open for a maximum of 12 hours a day, Sisira only allows those wearing a face mask to enter.

Aside from the dry good and other daily essentials, Sisira also allows his neighbours to provide a selection of items—typically food, whether fresh or prepared—to sell at his store.

“There is a woman in the neighbourhood who used to make sweets for avurudu and sell it to my store. She can’t do that this year,” he said. “How can we ask her to make kavili these days? We don’t have the ingredients to sell to them, let alone people who would want to buy kavili from us now.”

“People cannot celebrate avurudu properly until this wasangathaya [plague] passes over. No one will go paying calls to their family, or to the temple because it’s not allowed. Not even cakes are available”

Chandrika\* too has had to cancel all her New Year plans this time around. Living in Dematagoda with her family, she has had trouble finding essential items needed to make kavili.

“Putha told me to do something small even, but what are we to do?” she told Roar Media. “To make any [of our sweets]we need coconut oil. I can’t find coconut oil anywhere. We are using what we have very sparingly.”

A few weeks ago, things were far worse. “I couldn’t find flour anywhere. I called the nangi at the shop at the top of the road but she also told me they didn’t have any. I couldn’t find milk powder. And the turmeric–they had mixed haal piti (flour) into the turmeric powder so that they could sell it. When you put it into a little water, you’d see how it clots,” she said.

But despite the odds, people are looking for ways to celebrate in the simplest ways possible. This was apparent when earlier this week Chandrika one neighbour organised flour for her and another sent by a carton of eggs.

“Maybe I will make a small cake at least,” she mused.

\* Some names have been changed at the request of those we spoke to.

Cover image—steemit.com

Ihthisham Lye (27) felt a pain in his throat the moment he stepped out of the airport, after returning from a business trip to Malaysia on March 4. He recognised the signs of oncoming fever. “My wife was worried because the antibiotics I took did not work,” he told Roar Media.

With COVID19 fears at an all-time high, Lye had himself admitted himself to the National Infectious Diseases Hospital (IDH) in Angoda, where a majority of the suspected and confirmed cases are being treated, for testing.

“My wife was anxious until the results came out. It was negative. It was quite a relief for our families. Everyone was worried,” he said.

Although Lye was in the clear, doctors at the IDH instructed them both to strictly adhere to two-weeks of self-quarantine, as the possibility of symptoms developing later was very real.

What self-quarantine, or self-isolation entails has been subject to much speculation. In essence, it is a set of rules applied to a large number of healthy people, to ensure no one else in your family, or environs, are infected with the virus, that you may have potentially been exposed to.

Those in self-quarantine aren’t necessarily sick. However, since most of them have returned from abroad and COVID-19 has spread globally, they could develop symptoms of the disease within 14 days of returning.

People who may have been in contact with someone in Sri Lanka, who have subsequently tested positive for COVID-19, are also advised to enter self-quarantine, where they are monitored for any developing symptoms.

In the barest of terms, while in self-quarantine, you cannot leave your room or residence. You are not allowed to interact with your family and you spend your days all by yourself.

As per the home quarantine guidelines drawn up by the Epidemiology Unit of the Ministry of Health, those in self-quarantine must:

According to Dr Sumudu Hewage, a Community Physician attached to the Ministry of Health (MoH), the best way to go about this, was to act as though you may be potentially infected. “You [will be] doing a service to the rest of the society by staying at home and stopping the spread of this disease,” she said.

When Areeb Thassim (20) was first instructed to self-quarantine, he was relieved. A medical student in the Netherlands who arrived in the country in early March after a transit in Dubai, he had initially been told he would be taken to a quarantine centre, along with several others.

“We were taken to a separate building within the airport premises, where we were sprayed with disinfectants. They made us sign some forms and put us in a room, with a bunch of buses waiting outside. Nothing was initially communicated to us. With no food or water for over three-and-a-half hours, people became pretty panicked,” he told Roar Media.

They were, however, finally let go under strict instructions to self-quarantine. “Everyone was more than happy to do that,” Thassim said, although he has found the period of isolation less than appealing. “It has been really boring. I do see my family around the house from a distance. But I sleep most of the day now because I’ve really got nothing else to do.”

As part of its clampdown against COVID-19, the government opened in quick succession 44 quarantine centres across the country. Operated by the tr-forces, the quarantine centres housed in excess of 3, 000 returnees from ‘high-risk’ countries, like Iran, Italy and South Korea, and later, India and Europe as a whole. But numbers have since reduced as more and more leave having completed their two-week period in quarantine.

All others returning to Sri Lanka were instructed to self-quarantine at home, under the supervision of Public Health Inspectors (PHIs).

These PHIs, assigned by the MoH, conduct daily monitoring throughout the 14-day quarantine period, whether through personal visits, telephone inquiry or SMS.

If symptoms develop, PHI officers inform the MoH and regional epidemiologist, and transfer the patient via ambulance to the nearest designated hospital.

“In the last week, the police came to check on me twice,” Thassim told Roar Media. “I’ve [also] received two phone calls from them and [from] officers of the MoH. They didn’t physically see me, they just wanted to make sure I was at home and wasn’t displaying any symptoms, which they asked my father about. No one came into physical contact with me.”

Thassim’s 14-day quarantine period is coming to a close soon and he cannot wait to leave his room.

“It’s definitely gotten lonely. A couple of days are okay but knowing you don’t have a choice is worse,” he said.

To pass his boredom away, Thassim spends most of his day in front of the laptop or on his phone, studying, working, watching movies or video calling his friends.

“I eat alone in the kitchen where the meals are set up and kept ready for me. I work out a little in my room sometimes, but to be honest, it’s really hard to motivate myself to do much. I take a walk because staying in the room all day, I think would probably kill me,” he said.

It’s different for Lye. For a person whose time is mostly spent on travel, the self-quarantine period has been a welcome change in pace in which he finds solace.

“It’s actually good for me this time during the quarantine. My wife and I get to spend more time together. We usually don’t get to see each other this often because we both work full time,” he said.

This COVID-19 crisis is far from over in Sri Lanka. Each day new cases are reported and more people are moved into quarantine centres or advised to self-quarantine based on exposure. Until this affliction is completely eradicated, we must do our part, however difficult it is to limit the spread of the virus and to protect our loved ones, community, and country.

Cover—Thassim eats alone in the kitchen, where meals are laid out for him. Photo credits: Areeb Thassim/Design: Roar Media/Jamie Alphonsus

The COVID-19 pandemic is an evolving situation and as such information relating to it is rapidly changing. We encourage you to always check our latest articles, the updates on our live blog or the reportage on our Twitter feed.

We’re all very cued in on the news now: there have thus far been eleven cases of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka, the very first of which was successfully managed, the patient—a 40-year-old female Chinese tourist—returning to her country on February 19. The other ten are currently being monitored at the National Institute of Infectious Diseases (IDH).

These numbers are bound to change—and Roar promises to keep you updated. Right here, with this guide, and through our LIVE blog, that has been gathering and compiling COVID-related information since December 31.

The sheer volume of information and misinformation spreading through mainstream and social media channels has caused people to panic, many queuing at supermarkets to stock up on supplies for a foreseeable future in which they will either be in self-imposed quarantine on lockdown.

We created this guide with the specific purpose of ensuring everyone is informed of the most basic things you need to do to stay safe.

The state, the military and health authorities are working together to contain COVID-19 at the entry point and isolate clusters.

The first patient in Sri Lanka was a Chinese tourist. She was isolated and treated at the IDH and left the country having successfully recovered on Feb 19.

‘Patient Zero’ was an Italian tourist who has now left the country.

The second patient (first Sri Lankan patient) was a 51-year old tour guide, who had later come into contact with 60 people. All sixty are currently being observed at home. Five of the 60 who displayed symptoms of the flu were admitted to the IDH for further investigation.

The second tour guide came into contact with 25 people. Eight of these (all family members) displaying symptoms of the flu were admitted to the IDH and are under investigations.

On Saturday (March 14), in quick succession, the government confirmed the next five cases (bringing the total to 10) — most were returnees from Italy who were already in quarantine centres. One of the patients is the 17-year-old female relative of an existing patient.

It is clear the government is working hard to isolate and contain the spread of the virus.

the government has decided to close many establishments.

All private and public gatherings have also been prohibited for two weeks, starting on Sunday (March 15).

Because COVID-19 originated in Wuhan, China and spread from there, the points of entry into the country are of utmost importance.

the government has:

Stopped incoming flights from Bahrain, France, Spain, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden and Austria from March 15 at 2359hrs local time and until March 29 at 2400hrs local time

Visa-on-arrival has been suspended for all countries

All passengers from Iran, Italy, South Korea will be sent to mandatory quarantine for 14 days and only released thereafter.

Everyone else has been asked to adhere to a self-imposed quarantine by practising social isolation for two weeks at least.

All incoming travellers—whether local or foreign—will be subjected to the following precautionary treatment:

IF, at the point of entry, you show the following symptoms.

You will be:

Isolated at the port of entry and examined by officials on 24-hour duty.

Sent to the nearest designated hospital in an ambulance.

IF YOU have just returned from abroad or IF you have come into close physical contact with someone who has just returned from abroad or IF you have been to a public gathering and are thereafter displaying COVID 19 symptoms - you can go to your own general practitioner who will refer you to the nearest designated hospital, or go to the nearest designated hospital and have yourself checked.

Please note, private hospitals have not been permitted to conduct testing for COVID19 - so rather than waste big bucks trying, it is best to go to the nearest state hospital.

Quarantine is implemented through the Quarantine and Prevention of Diseases Ordinance of 1897 and International Health Regulations (IHR-2005).

“These locations were chosen mainly due to its space to accommodate a large number of people,” explained Dr. Paba Palihawadana, Chief Epidemiologist of the Ministry of Health, Some reports indicate that these centres were also selected for their location in slightly remote and less populated areas.

The camps can typically hold about 2000-2500 persons, are medically equipped and manned by 5-6 medical teams with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), have bunk beds, daily meals, and refreshments, Wi-Fi facilities, laundry and entertainment facilities —all provided for by the state.

Foreign travellers have been told they do not have the ‘social or legitimate right’ to refuse the quarantine process.

Any local non-compliance will result in imprisonment up to six months and could be fined between Rs. 2, 000 to 10, 000 if found guilty.

A 22-member National Action Committee including Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi, Western Province Governor Dr. Seetha Arambepola, Additional Secretary to the President Admiral (Rtd.) Jayanath Colombage, Health Secretary Bhadrani Jayawardane, Director-General of Health Services Dr. Anil Jasinghe, Specialist Dr. Anuruddha Padeniya, Additional Secretaries Dr. Sunil De Alwis and Lakshmi Somatunge, Dr. Nihal Jayatilake, SPC Chairman Dr. Prasanna Gunasena, Physician Dr.Ananda Wijewickrama, Brigadier Dr. Krishantha Fernando, Epidemiology Unit Director Dr. Sudath Samaraweera, Dr. Paba Palihawadana, Medical Research Institute Director Dr. Jayaruwan Bandara, Civil Aviation Authority Chairman Major General (Rtd.) G.A.Chandrasiri and the Immigration a Emigration Controller and six other members was set up on January 27 to direct efforts at containing COVID19.

Additionally, a new central office will be established on Monday (March 16) in Rajagiriya to handle all COVID related issues.

All inbound travellers are required to self-quarantine for two weeks.

Public Health Officers will visit throughout, and at the end of the 14-day period, conduct a final assessment to clear the person of COVID-19

D.r Samitha Ginige, Epidemiology Unit, Ministry of Health told Roar Media, "The public health staff of the Health Ministry carries out daily health check-ups on those who are in self -quarantine in order to ensure that they are strictly following the correct procedures. Their health is monitored to see if they have developed symptoms of the infection and if they have, they will be immediately taken to the quarantine centres.”

There is no doubt, the virality and reach of COVID19 is cause for concern. But panicking will not help anyone. There is a national task-force and a national plan to contain the virus. What you need to do is to:

Not fall victim to fake news by ensuring you consume your news from trusted sources

Work to educated and reassure those around you with the correct information

Practice hand hygiene, respiratory protection, social isolation

For good measure, here are the ways in which you can contact the government for more information:

Health Promotion Bureau Facebook page

Department of Government Information Facebook page

Department of Government Information YouTube channel

Govt. Info Dept. website

Also, don’t forget to protect yourself from the virus in the three most basic ways:

The public may soon get a first look of Colombo Port City’s new artificial beach.

Today is February 29. What’s so special about this day?

Here I come with the opportunity to share this mind blowing strategy doubling your bitcoin and earn huge some within few days and weeks too. Invest minimum of 0.2 BTC and watch it hash out 0.4 within a week mining , you want also to buy BTC or SELL any amount ? Kindly reply for more details donald1stan@gmail.com

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Death is a fact of life.

It transcends cultures and borders and is a universal human experience. However, rites and rituals concerning death vary; in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural country such as ours, rituals and rites surrounding funerals reflect the hopes, values and dreams of the community.

At a granular level, more differences are visible, although, as sociology senior lecturer at the Open University, Dr Harini Amarasuriya told Roar, many are undocumented.

“There is a regional factor as well as other matters at play here,” she said, explaining, that for example, there were differences in rituals around death for Sinhalese in the southern parts of the country, and Sinhalese in the central highlands.

“We should move away from these larger categories and highlight the very high level of diversity within groups as well,” she reiterated, adding, “We tend to think of Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim categories as tightly bound, whole categories, forgetting that none of these communities are homogenous and vary considerably within themselves.”

Before modern funeral techniques were adopted and elaborate ceremonies became a thing, Sri Lankan’s practiced an age-old tradition called kale gahanawa, in which cadavers were discarded in the forest to be consumed by animals.

The practice, now fallen out of use, made sense at a time when embalming procedures were unheard of, and was confirmed in an interview with the country’s oldest living citizen, Periyamaduwe Ukkuamma (101) last year.

“My earliest memory of the practice was when my father was carried away from our home, wrapped in a white cloth and a padura (sleeping mat),” she recalled. “I was playing in our garden at the time and the sight of my father is vividly etched in my memory. Only later did I realise that he was carried into the forest,” she said.

Only five years old at the time of her father’s death, the centenarian said kale gahanawa was widely practiced in the 1920s. “There were no cemeteries or crematoriums in our village at that time,” she said. “When a person died, they were not embalmed and preserved. What they did was wrap the body in a white cloth first and then in a padura. The body was then taken to the forest.” But the practice fell into disuse in the 1950s, she said.

Speaking to Roar, senior professor of sociology at the University of Colombo, Premakumara de Silva noted, however, that the practice of kale gahanawa was more common among the lower classes. “The elites and the aristocrats of ancient societies practiced rituals that primarily focused around burials or cremations, depending on whatever the dominant religion was believed in,” he said.

Sri Lanka is a predominantly Buddhist country, and while there are no universally agreed on death or funeral rites prescribed in any of the Buddha’s teachings, adherents usually follow a mix of the philosophy and commonly practiced traditions of the country.

Most Buddhists in Sri Lanka are not buried, but cremated instead. Academics believe that this is the result of the Brahmin practice predominant during the Buddha’s time—the Buddha himself was cremated in Kushinagar, India sometime between 410-370 BCE.

As a result, it is clear that it is not just the Buddhists that prefer to cremate their dead. The much smaller Hindu population in Sri Lanka also cremate their dead.

In the Hindu tradition, however, only Hindu males are allowed to attend the cremation, where the body is laid on top of a wooden pyre that is lit by the most senior member of the family. The women, meanwhile, remain at home, chanting mantras and singing hymns in reminiscence of life after death.

The concept of impermanence features strongly in Buddhism and adherents embrace the concept of death from an early age. As a result, it is expected that dhana (charity), or the virtues of metta (kindness) and karuna (compassion) are practiced throughout this life cycle to aid the person in achieving nibbana (or nirvana, the ultimate spiritual goal of release from rebirth).

As an extension of this, it has become customary for families to organise a ‘mala batha’, a simple, vegetarian meal of rice and curries, at the home of the deceased after he or she has been cremated, for those attending the wake. “This mala batha is cooked for the wake as well as the spirit who they believe has not left the household yet,” Professor de Silva said.

Buddhists in Sri Lanka also practice mathaka wasthra, during which monks chant prayers and eulogise the impermanence of life at the house of the deceased, the professor pointed out. This is in addition to the mataka-vastra-puja (custom of offering to monks a cloth on behalf of the dead), mathaka-bana (offering prayers for the dead) and dhanas, a form of almsgiving to accumulate merit on behalf of the deceased to help him in his journey through samsara (cycle of birth and death).

“It’s how grief is managed,” the professor said.

Many Sri Lankan Christians practice lathoni during a funeral. Literally, ‘laments’, lathoni refers to the practice of reading stories from the Bible or singing hymns during a funeral. Typically conducted by a priest or community leader, the lathoni is practiced with the intention of reminding those at the funeral of the eventual resurrection of the dead with the second coming of Jesus Christ or for calling blessings on the deceased and on the family left behind.

Professor de Silva noted that a similar practice was seen among the Buddhists during the colonial times.

“Instead of singing songs, they would read the Wessanthara Jathakaya (which tells the story of a compassionate prince who gives away everything he owns, including his children, to display the virtue of perfect generosity) as a lesson to the funeral attendees to practice the virtues of Buddhism and the impermanence of life,” he said.

While Islam has retained much of the rituals and traditions passed on through the teachings of the Prophet and contained in the Quran, the Muslim community in the country Sri Lanka has not been immune to some of the native practices around death and burial.

A person on his deathbed is expected to invoke God through the recitation of Talqeen (a phrase uttered in good faith) while those around him read the Quran out aloud. After death, the body must be washed three times, shrouded (if it’s a man, the body is shrouded in three pieces of white cloth, five if it’s a woman, to safeguard modesty) and buried within a day.

The bodies are not placed in a coffin, and are placed on the right side facing the Qibla (the direction of the Kaaba in Mecca). These are practices that have passed down from generation to generation, and have not changed since they were taught.

But Sheikh Muiz Bukhary, CEO of the Sakeenah Institute in Colombo, speaking to Roar pointed out instances of local customs seeping into the Muslim community.

“The religion teaches us that the people of the neighbourhood or the community—in the case of a death and a funeral—are supposed to provide food to the family of the deceased. But now it is happening the other way around,” he said.

However now, instead of the neighbourhood coming together to commiserate with the bereaved family and assist in funeral preparations, the family of the deceased is expected to provide meals and refreshments to those at the wake.

This concept of ‘mala gama’, in which the neighbourhood takes part in a funeral is commonly practiced in the country.

“The religion teaches us otherwise,” Sheikh Bukhary said. “It teaches us to go in and help during the grieving three days. It's done as an act of charity and in remembrance of the deceased.”

Cover image credits: ww2cemeteries.com

Aisha\*(50), flustered and somewhat embarrassed, showed us the bag she had bought with her. It contained a large wad of cotton wool, a pink comb and other implements — all used in the process of circumcision. She was at first reluctant to speak to us, unsure of how much to divulge, but gradually relaxed.

“I was circumcised by my grandmother,” she told us. “[And] she was the one who taught me. The first time I cut a girl child was when I was 18 years old. My hands were shaking, I remember being afraid. But it was quickly over.”

The circumcision of men and women at a very young age is a cultural practice, performed by some communities predominantly in Africa and Asia. However, the act of Female Genital Cutting (FGC) or Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is considered controversial and a violation of the rights of women and girls.

In Sri Lanka, the practice of FGM, also known as khatna or sunnat is common among sections of the Muslim community. However, it is important to note that it is not practiced by all Muslim families.

Aisha is one of a number of women who, when called upon by a family with a newborn baby girl, arrives to carry out the act. She believes that the age-old tradition will instil modesty and curb a girl’s sexual desire — all for the sake of spiritual purity.

Fathima\* (48), one of Aisha’s many relatives was also at home, when we visited her. The two women are well known in their communities for circumcising, although Aisha circumcises girls, and Fathima, only boys. Fathima is also, vehemently opposed to the circumcision of girls, thinking it unnecessary.

Although a traditional practice, FGM is performed behind closed doors, only gained notoriety in Sri Lanka in 2016 after the publication of a series of anonymous testimonials from 15 women of the Dawoodi Bohra Muslim community who had undergone the procedure. As a result of the revelation, many practitioners — colloquially, referred to as ostha maami — have now gone underground. A 2018 circular by the Ministry of Health prohibiting medical practitioners from carrying out the surgery on girl children or women made it even more difficult for ostha maami’s to perform their services now.

Aisha also feels the ‘service’ has gained a bad reputation overall — and not just as a result of the controversy around the act, but also because the role of a ‘community circumciser’ is now seen as a low-class occupation by many.

“The last baby I circumcised was in 2018,” Aisha said. “My children demanded that I stop doing this. Just because my mother did it, doesn’t mean that I should,” they said.

Fathima also feels that FGM has more or less become a business, in which poor families are swindled out of their money.

“Many of the people who carry out this procedure ask for a lot of money,” she said. People get scammed a lot. Sometimes you have to pay gold in weight of the child’s hair that is shaved. If it’s a girl, you have to pay in gold, if it’s a boy, then money. In my case, when I’m asked to do it, I take whatever that is given.”

“People cannot afford it,” she explained further. “They scramble to pay and give away the only gold they have. Some people think that they must do it, so they get loans and get into debt trying to find the money to circumcise their child. It has become a business.”

“I didn’t know of this till my daughter was born,” one woman wrote in the anonymous testimonies that were published in 2016. “My mother said she must be sunnat. I told her only boys get sunnat. She said no, girls also. Then she brought down a lady doctor and she came and cut. My baby cried a lot.”

FGM is performed on children of varying ages, the youngest between 9 to 40 days old and the oldest about seven years. Aisha claimed she has circumcised over 10 adults. The number of babies, she couldn’t recall—she has never kept count.

“The baby’s head is shaved first and [she] is bathed,” she said of the process. “She is then put into a tub of water, usually the one they bathe the baby in. We place the blade between her legs and swiftly make the cut; it’s more or less a single straight line [on her clitoral hood],” she said, drawing a vertical line in the air in front of her in demonstration.

“We use the water to wash the cut clean. Thereafter, we put eau-de-cologne on it and swab it with cotton. That’s it. It won’t bleed after that. No problem. It’s a very simple thing.”

Many believe—or are made to believe—that the practice is mandatory and that Muslim girls must be circumcised. However, scholars and anti-FGM lobbyists argue that there is no supporting evidence in religious text.

Aisha herself, while seeming to belive in the underlying morality of female circumcision, did not feel it was as mandatory as claimed, despite engaging in the practice. “Islam gives prominence to cleanlinnes, that was what my grandmother told me. So the cut is made to purify. It makes the girl humble and she learns respect,” she said.

“I learnt the practice from my mother-in-law,” Faithima interjected at this point. “But it was my grandmother who explained it to me first. [According to her, if the labia [minora] of a woman is not cut, it will stretch. [But] this will not happen when you’re circumcised.”

A number of other reasons have been out forward as justification for practicing FGM in Sri Lanka—some even believing circumcision improves the appearance of the genitalia, increasing the male partner’s interest. And yet, perhaps the most incredulous and least factual of these is the belief that FGM is medically beneficial.

While there is said to be compelling evidence that male circumcision has health benefits, female circumcision has no known health benefits. In fact, the World Health Organisation (WHO) recognises the act of female circumcision as procedures that intentionally alter or cause injury to the female genital organs.

There is also evidence that these procedures can cause severe bleeding and later lead to problems with urinating, cysts, infections as well as complications in childbirth and an increased risk of newborn deaths.

However, supporters of the practice have spoken extensively on what they perceive as the WHO’s hypocritical double standards against FGM, saying it was being selective about not implementing the ban on male circumcision, and also turning a blind eye towards genital cosmetic surgeries.

As a solution, supporters of FGM have suggested the procedure should be medicalised — carried out by medical professionals in a sterile environment, arguing this would bring about a win-win situation, ensuring the safety of a person being circumsiced while respecting religious and cultural tradition.

Lobbyists of the pro-camp, while recognising the harm in some forms of the practice, have suggested that authorities ban Type 2 and Type 3 FGM, which cause long-term harm by altering the genitalia completely, but permit Type 1 and Type 4 which make an insignificant cut, that has no long term effects, if carried out by medical personnel.

Studies have also shown there is a lack of knowledge about the practice and taboos around talking about women’s issues that also hinder progress. A recent study by the Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka (FPA) and the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) revealed that while conversation on FGM is evolving there is still a need for more space to navigate the complexities of the subject.

Aarefa Johari, co-founder of Sahiyo, a non-governmental organisation advocating an end to the practice of FGM, said that despite the odds, Sri Lanka has shown great promise in the battle against FGM.

“A lot has taken place since 2016, for the better,” she said. “The issue has truly come out in the open, activists have worked hard to collect and curate stories from survivors and take it to the necessary government representatives. However, the government is yet to take a firm stance,” she said.

While many countries have criminalised FGM, Johari does not believe that laws alone will end the practice. “To change a social norm you need to work with communities on the ground, and convince them rather than coerce them to abandon the practice,” she said.

But Aisha, resistant to the change taking place around her, has resorted to leaving matters in God’s hands. “The right thing will happen in the end,” she said. “We are not scholars or scientists to tell what is right or wrong. I have stopped this but many families still continue this practice. But if it is wrong, it will stop.”

Fathima is less pliable and is adamant that the practice must stop.

“I don’t believe there is any use for this practice,” she said. “It’s the community that pressures families into continuing this. Why is this necessary? This is wrong but they still do it,” she said.

Cover photo credits: Roar Media/Kris Thomas

—Names have been changed to protect identity.

There's something in the water...

Galle Face Green got its own turtle hatchery after a surprising discovery last month.

Learn why this Forest Department official has won Sri Lankan hearts.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an evolving situation and as such information relating to it is rapidly changing. We encourage you to always check our latest articles, the updates on our live blog or the reportage on our Twitter feed.

Over 100 people have died and over 4,500 cases of the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) have been reported globally, after the virus was first discovered in Wuhan City, China on 31 December 2019. The virus has since spread to at least 14 other countries, including Australia, France, Germany Malaysia, Nepal and Singapore.

The first case in Sri Lanka was reported yesterday (27 January), when a female Chinese tourist quarantined at the National Institute of Infectious Disease (IDH) – who at first tested negative, later tested positive for the pathogen. Five others are quarantined, even as the government is moving fast to ensure 2019-nCoV does not take hold in the country.

What Is A Coronavirus?

A coronavirus is a group of zoonotic viruses, which occur in animals and can be transmitted to humans. Transmission is thought to be primarily through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes. A novel coronavirus (nCoV) is a new strain that has not been previously transmitted to people. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), there are several known coronaviruses circulating in animals that have not yet infected humans. Previously, only SARS—which was transmitted from civet cats to humans, and MERS—which was transmitted from dromedary camels to humans have affected human populations.

So The 2019-nCoV Is…?

A novel coronavirus, colloquially known as the ‘Wuhan Pneumonia’, due to the fact that it is believed to have originated from the Wuhan wet market in the Hubei province, where varieties of animals, both dead and alive are sold. The wet market has now been closed down.

The virus spread rapidly across Wuhan, causing a shutdown of the city of 11 million people. Ten other cities and at least 33 million people—all in the Hubei province—were put on lockdown soon after, with only state authorities able to enter and leave the city.

The 2019-nCoV is similar to SARS and MERS: the pathogen targets the respiratory system (pharynx, larynx, trachea, bronchi and bronchioles), causing fever, cough, shortness of breath and breathing difficulties that lead to kidney failure and even death.

How Deadly Is It?

With 4,500 confirmed cases and 107 deaths, the mortality rate for the virus is 2.3 percent. This is lower than the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003, which averaged 15 percent and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) which began to spread in 2012 and has averaged a mortality rate of 35 percent.

An article in the peer-reviewed Journal of the American Medical Association published on January 23 also confirmed that the fatality rate of 2019-nCoV is thus far lower than that of SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV, but warned that the ultimate scope and effects of the outbreak remain to be seen.

Times reported that official data indicated that most victims were over the age of 65, the oldest being two 88-year-old men. The youngest victim however, is a 35-year-old man. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has also said that older adults and people with underlying health conditions may be at increased risk for severe disease.

How Does It Spread?

Human coronavirus is spread from an infected person to others through the air by coughing and sneezing, or through close personal contact, such as touching or shaking hands, or touching an object or surface with the virus on it and then touching your mouth, nose, or eyes before washing your hands. Although rare, it can also spread through fecal contamination.

According to the CDC, the origins of the virus at the Wuhan seafood and animal market suggests initial animal-to-person spread. ‘However, a growing number of patients reportedly have not had exposure to animal markets, indicating person-to-person spread is occurring,’ it said, adding that it was unclear how easily or sustainably this virus is spreading between people.

Which Countries Are Affected Right Now?

The latest reports indicate the 2019-nCoV has spread to at least 15 countries, including Sri Lanka. Having originated in China, the virus spread rapidly to Thailand, Japan, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, Vietnam, Nepal, Cambodia, Australia, the United States, France and Canada.

Is There A Vaccine For It?

No, there are no vaccines to protect you against the infection. Chinese authorities however, were able to identify the new type of coronavirus after genetic samples were isolated a week after the first case was detected. By 10 January, the genetic material of the virus was sequenced and made public by Chinese researchers, allowing potential study and development of a vaccine or treatment.

Currently, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations is working with WHO, Innovi Pharmaceuticals, the University of Queensland, Moderna Inc. and the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases to develop vaccines. In the absence of a vaccine, it is imperative that adequate measures are taken to reduce your risk of infection.

How Do You Avoid It?

Misinformation is the second biggest threat during an outbreak. So it is pivotal to stay informed with true sources.

Here’s how you can stay safe:

What Is Sri Lanka Doing About It?

The government has installed three thermal scanners to identify potentially infected tourists at the Bandaranaike International Airport in Katunayake. While all passengers arriving from China were initially channeled through a specifically designated gate for screening, visa-on-arrival facilities for Chinese nationals has been suspended until further notice.

The government also initiated a programme to repatriate Sri Lankan students currently trapped in Wuhan and other cities in China. Over 200 students have reportedly already left China and more are left waiting as authorities try to negotiate around a Chinese blockade on evacuating citizens.

The Ministry of Health has also established two hotlines, 0710170717 or 0113071073 for more information on the coronavirus.

It was also decided that Sri Lankan students arriving from China will be quarantined at the Diyatalawa Army Camp for two weeks.

Cover image courtesy Adolfo Arranz/ South China Morning Post

Dayaseeli (53) was only 21 when she was diagnosed with leprosy—the debilitating infectious disease that causes severely disfiguring sores on the body. Because of the severity of the disease patients are shunned from society, despite modern science having discovered means of curing the disease.

Dayaseeli remembers to date how her married sister was reluctant to visit her for fear of contracting the disease. And although Dayaseeli was of age, she would never be married herself, as a result of the disease.

World Leprosy Day is today, the last Sunday of January, chosen by French humanitarian Raoul Follereau to raise global awareness of the disease and the fact that it can be prevented, treated and cured.

The second oldest disease known to humankind, a cure for the infection evaded medical practitioners until the 1940s when multidrug therapy was formulated to combat it.

Spreads via droplets from the nose and mouth during close and frequent contact with untreated cases, leprosy is now completely curable if treated early If however, the infection spreads extensively, the subsequent nerve and tissue damage will have to be treated over a lifetime.

Two years ago, in 2017, the Anti Leprosy Campaign (ALC) commemorated World Leprosy Day by introducing a plan to eradicate leprosy by this year—2020.

Speaking to ALC Director Dr Champa Aluthweera on the the status of the programme, Roar Media found out however, that the infection—rather than being contained, is spreading.

“In 2018, ALC recorded 1, 703 patients who tested positive for the disease, Dr. Aluthweera said. “Since then, the number of new cases remained static at almost 2, 000 cases. Almost 11 percent of the new cases were reported from those who were less than 15 years of age [the global criteria for child leprosy cases is 10 percent]. This is a major challenge.”

To Dr Aluthweera, the high number of child cases can mean that the infection is spreading. And 2,000 new cases against a population of a little of 21 million is an alarming factor as well, she felt.

But because symptoms of the disease take long to manifest—sometimes over 20 years, health officials find it hard to declare the disease an epidemic.

And so, despite having eliminated leprosy as a public health problem in 2001, the ALC has failed to reach its goal of eradicating the disease by 2020.

Dr Aluthweera noted, “The World Health Organisation (WHO) has declared Sri Lanka to be a high risk country, due to the increasing number of cases. The high number of new cases, the percentage of child cases and the rise of multibacillary cases has resulted in this decision from the WHO. We suspect that there is a hidden epidemic in the country.”

During the time of the Dutch in Ceylon, as this island was known then, leprosy patients were banished to leper colonies, the first of which was established in Hendala in 1708 and is active to this day, housing 29 long term patients long abandoned by their families.

The second leprosy colony, was a hospital established on the Mantheevu island, in Batticaloa in 1921, where three patients live out their lives in complete isolation. We wrote about this, in depth, here.

A treatment for leprosy was not introduced to the country until 1983—and even that, by the ALC. The ALC has continued to drive the treatment programme, which now covers the entire island. All regional health bodies are equipped to identify and treat the disease, Dr Aluthweera said.

But a stigma still follows the disease.

“Maybe the hardest thing that I had to go through because of this disease was when I was told to leave the family I was serving for 20 years,” Dayawathi (66) told Roar Media.

She was diagnosed with the disease when she was 41, and was already married at the time, with two children and a husband earning a daily wage. The diagnosis was an additional blow to the family already struggling with making ends meet.

“It’s hard to live with a disease,” Dayawathi said. “When I was told that I can’t work anymore after they amputated my leg, after working 20 years with them, I was terribly sad.”

“When I was diagnosed, I didn’t want my family to know. But I ended up telling them everything,” she recalled. “I remember the doctor talking to my husband and the rest of the family about how just because I had this disease, does not mean I should be thrown out onto the road. They have taken care of me. I don’t know how I would have survived without my family.”

“But now I feel as if my other leg is also going through the same thing. The doctors said that I will have to come soon and they will decide what to do. I’m afraid of what they might say,” she said.

Against the odds, with the support of organisations like the ALC, and Society for Upliftment and Rehabilitation of Leprosy Affected Persons (SUROL), those struck with the disease continue to fight to live. The battle of over three centuries is, clearly, far from over.

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) spreads in three ways: through unprotected sexual intercourse, through blood, and from Mother-To-Child (MTCT). And while advanced HIV, or Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is not curable, HIV can be controlled, and Sri Lanka recently scored a big victory by eliminating mother-to-child transmission of the disease.

But let’s understand just how important this win is.

MCTC is when HIV is transmitted from a mother to her child during pregnancy, labour, delivery or breastfeeding. The risk of transmission from mother to child is very high if an HIV positive mother is not treated.

The National STD/AIDS Control Programme (NSACP) run by the Ministry of Health decided it would prevent the transmission of HIV from mother to child. “We screen[ed] each and every pregnant mother through our antenatal clinics around the country,” Dr Chandrika Jayakody, National Programme Consultant for IEC (Information, Education, Communication) and Condom Promotion at the NSACP said.

Pregnant mothers were offered a package of tests. “[They] are screened for haemoglobin levels, blood group,” she said, adding that the mothers were also made to take the VDRL test. “We have added this particular test into that package as well. By offering this test, we can identify mothers who are HIV positive.” And once the HIV status of a mother is assessed, treatment can begin.

Mothers who have been identified with being HIV positive are recommended Antiretroviral Treatment (ART), which minimises the virus particles in the patient, which in turn reduces the risk of transmission to the child.

“If the mother adheres to the treatment, continues it throughout her pregnancy and afterwards, we can completely eliminate the transmission risk,” Dr Jayakody said.

ART is a lifelong treatment. Even after the mothers give birth, they will have to continue the treatment to maintain their health, for if they stop, they will risk transmission to the child through breast milk. The mother's health will also begin to deteriorate.

ART was introduced to Sri Lanka in 2004, but it was only in 2013 that an exclusive treatment programme for HIV-positive mothers was introduced as a pilot project in the Kaduwela MOH area. Later, the NSACP expanded the programme, and by 2017, all services were available islandwide.

The NSACP noted that between 2017 and 2018, 32 mothers with the condition gave birth to HIV negative children, who are healthy to date—the team believes the number of cases will not increase.

However, the overall number of recorded HIV cases have been increasing. In 2018, the NSACP identified 350 people with HIV, which is an increase from the 285 cases identified in 2017. By the third quarter of 2019, health officials had diagnosed 314 cases.

The increasing number of cases, in a way, is a good trend, Dr Jayakody said. “It means that more people are coming for our services and are receiving treatment. By knowing the status, diagnosis becomes efficient and treating patients can become faster. Through treatment, we can cut down the spread of the disease,” she said.

She added that while the World Health Organisation (WHO) has announced its goal to eliminate HIV/ AIDS by 2030, “we have decided to expedite matters and brought up the local deadline to 2025.”

Cover—businessinsider.com

A new virus is spreading rapidly in China. But health authorities here think there is no need to panic, yet.

An engineer from Anuradhapura has found a way to drive out invading elephants by using sound waves.

Sri Lankan born Mathilda Karlsson is the first Sri Lankan equestrian to qualify for the Olympics.

A decade has come to an end, and as we step into a new one, we must stop to reflect on the past; to savour the glory of victory and grieve from the bitterness of loss. The last decade has brought great changes to our world and challenged us to grow; to understand diverse perspectives, to enlarge borders, to increase communication and to come together as a global community.

Although a small island, Sri Lanka is not immune to the events that impact the world—as will become evident in the summary below. We’ve also been buffeted by crises of our own but soared with the triumph of hard-earned victories. If anything, the last decade is a testament to our resilience as a nation and an assurance to our ability to both endure and flourish in the future.

Here’s a recap of the events of the past decade, from 2010 to 2019.

For Sri Lanka, the decade began with the dawn of peace. Just the year before, in May 2009, the three-decade-long civil war that had ravaged the country came to a decisive end, when the Sri Lankan government led by (then) President Mahinda Rajapaksa, crushed the separatist terrorist organisation, the LTTE.

At the January 2010 election, Rajapaksa was re-elected President, riding on the popularity and status he acquired for ending the war.

Despite the victory, Sri Lanka continued to be dogged at international fora on allegations of human rights violations perpetrated at the end of the war. The government of Sri Lanka has maintained, however, that the end of the war was a humanitarian effort to rescue civilians trapped by the LTTE.

Cyclone Jal, the fifth of the fourth Severe Cyclonic Storm of the 2010 North Indian Ocean cyclone season caused torrential rains and flooding in Sri Lanka, affecting around 80, 000 persons. The 2010 North Indian Cyclone Season was the most intense tropical cyclone season in the North Indian Ocean since the 1998.

Unrest in the Arab world due to political disorder and economic instability saw in the Arab Spring, a series of public uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, as well as civil wars in Libya and Syria. The tumultuous events that began in January 2011 had a major impact on intra-regional politics but also exposed the convergences of interest between global powers, the United States and Russia.

In Sri Lanka, there was a ‘significant indirect impact on trade via escalating oil prices’, with the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) pointing out that the ‘key impact on Sri Lankan trade is the adverse effect on trade balance due to high oil prices.’ The risk of the crisis spreading to other partners like Saudi Arabia and UAE was also flagged at the time, but Sri Lanka was not critically impacted.

Cyclone Nilam caused heavy rain and flooding in north-eastern Sri Lanka in October,year, killing 10 and displacing over 4, 000. The deadliest tropical cyclone to directly affect South India since Cyclone Jal in 2010, Nilam also damaged about 1, 000 houses across Sri Lanka.

A prison riot broke out at the Welikada Prison complex in November, when guards and prisoners clashed in reaction to a raid for illegal items. Prisoners took officers hostage sparking a siege that the Special Task Force of the Police responded to with tear gas and calling for more help. As many as 27 people were killed in the clash, and 40 injured.

The Colombo-Katunayake expressway (E03) was declared open by President Rajapaksa. The 25.8 kilometre long expressway is Sri Lanka's second ‘E Class highway’ and links the capital Colombo with Bandaranaike International Airport in Katunayake, as well as the coastal Negombo town. Funded in part by the Exim Bank of China (USD 248.2 million of a total cost of USD 292 million, the rest funded by the government of Sri Lanka), construction began in October 2009 and the expressway was declared open in October 2013.

In November, Sri Lankan hosted the 23rd Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM). The summit meeting was boycotted by the Canadian, Indian, and Mauritian Prime Ministers due to the allegations of human rights violations and alleged war crimes against the government of Sri Lanka that gained international attention during the period.

The year saw great cricketing triumph after 18 years, when Sri Lanka won the maiden ICC T20 World Cup. The victory was bittersweet, however, as it was followed by the departure of two cricketing legends Mahela Jayawardene and Kumar Sangakkara from international cricket.

In 2014, Sri Lanka marked ten years since the Indian Ocean tsunami that left as many as 1, 700 dead, with beachside memorials and a ride on the restored ‘Queen of the Sea’ train that was caught to the waves. The train was decorated with Buddhist flags and Buddhist chants were played throughout the journey that traced its ill-fated course.

Construction of the Colombo International Financial City, or the Colombo Port City , on reclaimed land adjacent to the Galle Face Green also began in 2014. Funded by the China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC), a portion of the reclaimed land is to be utilised by China, while the remainder would be used by the government of Sri Lanka.

2014 saw anti-Muslim tensions erupt in riots in the towns of Aluthgama, Beruwala and Dharga Town in the Kalutara District. At least four people were killed and 80 injured and mosques, homes, shops and factories were destroyed.

Meanwhile, instability in the Middle East saw a rise in religious extremism that manifested in the form of the Islamic State (IS), a fundamentalist organisation that carried out massive terrorist attacks around the world and erased the borders of Syria and Iraq. A multinational military intervention against the Islamic State began in 2014.

The Middle Eastern crisis also saw an influx of refugees migrating to European nations that sparked one of the most enduring crises of the Western world, an increase in identity politics and nationalism as a reaction.

In 2015, popular President Rajapaksa faced a devastating defeat at the hands of his one-time ally Maithripala Sirisena, who deflected at the last moment to present a united front with the United National Party’s Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The Central Bank bond scam erupted at the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, when Governor Arjuna Mahendran was accused of insider trading to benefit a company owned by his son-in-law Arjun Aloysius. The ensuing—and ongoing— case took on political proportions with accusations that Mahendran was being protected by the then government. Mahendran who absconded to Singapore is still avoiding arrest, while Aloysius was arrested in 2018.

Another event that captured the attention of the public was the visit of Pope Francis to Sri Lanka. The Pope was brought to Colombo in a special procession, and devotees lined the streets to see His Eminence, who later conducted a large service at the Galle Face Green.

The global Me Too Movement also saw a rise in popularity in 2015. The movement against sexual harassment and sexual assualt began as an online call for action but grew in proportion, taking down perpetrators across the globe. Popular figures such as actor Bill Crosby, Harvey Weinstein and R. Kelly faced charges and some even sentenced for their actions.

The international economic recession that began in 2007 saw its climax in 2016. It sparked a global financial crisis that resulted in the European debt crisis—the most prominent of these Brexit, which saw the United Kingdom determining to exit the European Union.

In Sri Lanka, a series of explosions occurred after a fire broke out at the Salawa Army Camp armory in Kosgama, Avissawella. The entire camp was destroyed as devastating damage was caused to houses in the vicinity. At least one person was killed in the incident.

Meanwhile, in the United States, billionaire and reality TV star Donald Trump was elected the 45th President. His style of leadership has been criticised for bringing about divisions and instability. He is also known for his frequent use of the micro-blogging site Twitter on which he posts uncensored and often inflammatory comments.

On Sinhala and Tamil New Years day, April 14, 2017, a portion of the Meethotamulla garbage dump collapsed burying a number of families living nearby. Official reports claimed over 20 deaths from the incident, while 1, 765 persons were affected. The incident was criticised as being the result of a failure to implement effective waste management systems.

Sri Lanka also entered the Guinness Book of World Records this year with the world’s largest artificial Christmas tree. A project led by (then) Minister of Ports and Shipping Arjuna Ranatunga, the tree was built on the Galle Face Green in Colombo at a height of 72 metres. The tree was unveiled in December 2016, but received official acceptance by the Guinness Book of World Records in 2017.

In 2018, Sri Lanka team won the world’s first Deaf T20 World Cup, winning all games except for one in the series. Sri Lanka also made headlines by winning the Asian Netball Championship, demolishing Singapore 69-50. The ‘world’s tallest netball player’—Sri Lanka’s Tharjini Sivalingam became a sensation for her near perfect 98 per cent shooting accuracy.

‘Sri Lankan Hulk’ Lucion Pushparaj also emerged as the world champion at the 2018 World Bodybuilding Championship (over 100 kg category) which was held in Bangkok, Thailand in December 2018—this was the first time a Sri Lankan ever won a World Bodybuilding Championship title.

The spate of anti -Muslim riots that emerged in 2014 saw a resurgence this year. Vicious riots were reported in Digana and Ampara, leading to death and destruction. Meanwhile, Dr. Hasini Jayatilaka, a postdoctoral researcher at Stanford University, was featured in the Forbes 30 Under 30 Science category for her research on a breakthrough in metastasis and cancer.

The Constitutional Crisis, also at the latter end of 2018, saw the complete breakdown of government for over 50 days when (then) President Sirisena appointed his former President Mahinda Rajapaksa as Prime Minister, even while Ranil Wickremesinghe remained in the post, resulting in the unique situation in which the country had two sitting Prime Ministers. The Supreme Court intervened and deemed the appointment of Rajapaksa unconstitutional.

The year opened with the horror of the Easter Sunday terror attacks, the repercussions of which are still reverberating across the nation. The series of explosions that occured at three churches and three luxury hotels resulted in the deaths of over 250 people, affecting and injuring many more. This is the first terror attack Sri Lanka was exposed to, ten years since the end of the civil war.

Three weeks after the attacks, the town of Minuwangoda fell victim to anti-Muslim rioters, who attacket homes, businesses and mosques. One person was killed in the attacks.

Meanwhile, in November, former President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s brother Gotabhaya Rajapaksa swept into power as the 8th President of Sri Lanka. President Rajapaksa has vowed to remove the threat of terrorsim and instill discipline in the country.

Just before the election, in an unprecendented move, (then President) Maithripala Sirisena granted presidential pardon to controversial murder convict Jude Shramantha Jayamaha who was incarcerated for the brutal murder of 19-year-old Yvonne Jonsson. Jayamaha was also 19 at the time. The release caused a public outcry, drawing attention to the alleged privilege Jayamaha received as a result of being from a ‘prominent’ Colombo family.

Designer Nayana Ashcharya Peiris, who was blinded after falling victim to a bomb blast in 2000, was named among the BBC's 100 inspiring and influential women from around the world this year.

During the latter part of the year, Caroline Jurie won the Mrs. World title for 2020 after a lapse of 35 years. She is the second Sri Lankan to win the title after the current Mayor of Colombo Rosy Senanayake won it in 1984.

Touching on the economy, Sri Lanka’s GDP grew from $56 billion in 2009 to $87 billion in 2018. While the Easter Sunday attacks dealt a major blow to the country’s economy in the first quarter of the year, the country fought back during the latter part of the year: according to the statistics released by the Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka has witnessed a 2.7 percent growth in the final quarter of the year. Sri Lanka was also promoted to an upper middle income earning country from a lower middle income earning country ,according to the updated classification of the World Bank due to the increase in gross national income. The country also managed to retain the title of Lonely Planet’s top travel destination for the second year, despite the impact of the terror attacks.

At the 2019 South Asian Games, the Sri Lankan contingent won an impressive 251 medals, securing third place overall with 40 gold, 83 silver and 128 bronze medals. Meanwhile, in October, the country opened its third international airport, in Jaffna while the Lotus Tower, South Asia’s tallest man-made tower was also opened to the public this year.

In 2019, 15-year-old climate change activist Greta Thunberg gained widespread popularity. Climate strikes led by Thunberg, inspired similar movements around the world—even in Sri Lanka. Meanwhile, 2019 saw controversial U.S. President Donald Trump face an impeachment motion on charges of abuse of power and obstruction of Congress.

These events have dominated the last decade and will continue to make impact across the new one.

The new decade is hours away. How will you live the third decade of the new millennium? Only time will tell.

Remembering Sri Lanka's maverick poet and author.

The elderly man had not seen his family in 40 years. He is sometimes unable to correctly remember numbers. When asked how old he was, Sena Jenejasoriah said, “five-three”. Hospitalised for leprosy, an illness that was incurable a long time ago, Jenejasoriah is disabled, but no longer afflicted by the disease. But he has not been home since the day he was hospitalised.

Jenejasoriah is one of three patients receiving care within the crumbling walls of the Mantheevu Island Leprosy Hospital in Batticaloa. Secluded to an island and cut-off from the rest of civilisation, the hospital houses the country's loneliest patients.

Jenejasoriah is from Beliatta, Hakmana— some 200 kilometres south of Batticaloa — and was nine when he was first diagnosed with leprosy. “When the wounds showed up on my legs first, my family took me to the Matara Hospital. I remember being admitted there. That was the last time I saw[them],” he told me.

According to Jenejasoriah, he was then transferred from the Matara Hospital to the Mantheevu Island Hospital. He remembers taking a bus to Batticaloa and then arriving at the hospital, where he would remain for the rest of his life. Today, 44 years after he was first hospitalised, a square room in the male ward, furnished with a single bed, a miserable mattress, a makeshift couch and a broken television set is what he calls home. Even the handful of clothes he wears were received through donations.

“I didn’t bring anything when I came here,” he said. I can’t remember exactly where my house is, and I don’t remember how to go there.”

Leprosy—also known as Hansen's disease after the scientist who discovered in 1873—has its roots in ancient civilization and is the result of an infection caused by Mycobacterium leprae, a close cousin of the bacterium that causes tuberculosis. The M. leprae that causes the disease evaded medical practitioners until the 1940s, after which a multidrug therapy was formulated and introduced to combat it. Depending on the severity of the M. leprae, a regimen of six to twelve months of rigorous treatment would be recommended.

Usually spread via droplets from the nose and mouth during close and frequent contact with untreated cases, leprosy is no longer as debilitating and horrific a disease as it was once thought to be—although it can lead to progressive and permanent damage to the skin, nerves, limbs, and eyes if left untreated. But the stigma was such in the past that patients with deformities and signs of having contracted the disease were segregated from society, which is how leper colonies came into being.

In pre-Independence Sri Lanka, the powers vested to hospital and government officials through the Lepers Ordinance No. 4 of 1901 saw the quarantine of patients into two leprosariums—the first built in Hendala in 1708 by the Dutch, followed by the one built by the British on the Mantheevu Island, in 1921.

As per the Ordinance ‘harbouring’ a ‘leper’ was not permitted, and Public Health Inspectors were allowed to ‘forcibly’ remove patients to be taken to a colony.

While the Ordinance has largely fallen into disuse, those affected by the archaic legislature remain outcasts with no families or homes to return to. And while Cabinet approval was granted to amend the Ordinance to allow patients at Hendala and Mantheevu leprosy hospitals ‘maintain social relationships’ in 2018, the Legal Draftsman’s Department told Roar Media, the amendments were still being drafted.

But the inmates at the leprosy hospital on Mantheevu Island are not the only incarcerated patients. “At the moment, there are 29 patients living out the rest of their lives at the Hendala Leprosy Hospital,” Dr Champa Aluthweera, Director of the Anti Leprosy Campaign of the Ministry of Health told Roar Media. The patients, many of whom share similar stories to Jenejasoriah and his fellow patients on Mantheevu Island, have no families to return to.

A report by architect, A. Woodeson for the Engineering Association of Ceylon, dating back to 1930, claimed that the hospital maintained over 10, 000 patients and managed twenty-four individual cottages, male and female wards, an administration block, an isolation ward, a dressing station, a laundry, a government school, quarters for the staff, and dormitories for the Religious Sisters of the Franciscan Order who nursed the patients. The hospital staff included one medical officer, two apothecaries, one overseer, 16 labourers and 16 attendants.

The survey report outlined: “The institution is a wonderful example of efficiency and cleanliness and reflects great credit on the Medical Officer and staff who are keen on their duties. The Medical Officer is a thorough optimist and the Religious Sisters are splendid examples of quiet unwearying devotion.”

Over the past 80 years, however, the situation at the Mantheevu Leprosy Hospital has changed for the worse. The land is thick with shrubs and imposing trees. Towering grass fields have invaded the paved road—now, diminished to a sandy walking path—from the small jetty to the hospital premises.

The cottages that once housed patients have been abandoned and are falling apart.

The wards are in a state of decay; the walls now brown with the constant bombardment of bird droppings [there are more birds on the island than people] and the walkways chipped off of its cement, exposing the brickwork underneath.

Apart from the one ward at the hospital which houses the three patients, only the haunted mansion-esque administration office, a grey water tank, an old church and a Hindu kovil stand.

Ponniah Punnuthuraih is the oldest surviving patient at the Mantheevu Island Leprosy Hospital. At the age of 63, his mind is a patchwork of scattered memories—except for his first day at the hospital, when he was only five years old.

“There used to be many. I remember there were as many as 50 other [patients] here. But not any more,” he said.

Punnuthuraih’s room is similar to Jenejasoriah’s one: it contains one bed and a tiny cupboard in which he keeps his neatly folded sarongs and shirts, alongside his plate and cup. He is the only patient to own a working radio and a television set. “That’s how I spend my time; watching TV and listening to the radio,” he said. “I bathe. [And] I eat when the food is brought in.”

Like Jenejasoriah, Punnuthuraih has no home he can return to.

Despite the World Health Organisation (WHO) declaring that leprosy was eliminated from the world in 2000, there has been an influx of new cases in various parts of the world. In Sri Lanka alone, Dr Aluthweera noted, approximately 2, 000 new cases are reported islandwide every year.

“The number of new cases [were] static over the years. Even so, 2, 000 new cases in comparison with a population of 21 million individuals, is still an alarming status,” she said.

However, none of those recently affected are subjected to the ostracism Jenejasoriah and Punnuthuraih faced when they were diagnosed. Most new cases, upon diagnosis, are treated and cured completely. Nevertheless, colonies which stood the test of time have endured, not only in Sri Lanka but also elsewhere in the world.

In India, there are approximately 700 active colonies, with self-imposed patients. Even the largest US sanctioned colony on Molokai, Hawaii, that shut its doors in 1969, continues to home six patients who chose to stay back.

In Sri Lanka, the 29 patients at the Hendala Leprosy Hospital will live out the rest of their lives there, with no home or families to return to.

Punnuthuraih says he would love to see his family even one more time, but he has no memory of how to get home, or even where his home is. “I have no land to my name, no money, and no skills. I can’t find employment. I don’t know anyone outside of the people here [on the island]. I’ve lived here my whole life. So why should I go back?” he asked.

Sri Lanka has no comprehensive programme of rehabilitation for the many disabled leprosy patients. At present, the Mantheevu Leprosy Hospital comes under the administration of the Batticaloa Teaching Hospital, but when asked why the three patients of the Mantheevu Leprosy Island continue to live isolated lives, Hospital Director Dr Kalaranjani Ganesalingam said: “The patients have not been relocated elsewhere due to the instructions received by the Ministry of Health. The instructions came in during the tenure of my predecessor. I have not received further instructions that said otherwise.”

While Dr Ganesalingam, in her capacity as a medical practitioner accepted that the patients require rehabilitation and reintegration into society, she noted cryptically, “Whenever and whatever they [the patients] need, we [Batticaloa Teaching Hospital] provides.”

However, Former Director of the Batticaloa Teaching Hospital, Dr Ibra Lebbe told Roar Media there had never been any instructions from the Health Ministry relating to the conditions of the patients at the island hospital.

“It is up to the Ministry to make a decision to relocate the patients elsewhere. However, the matter was never discussed during my tenure. There are institutions that can coordinate these discussions—they have all the rights to do so. [But] Even during my tenure, there was no proper programme to rehabilitate these patients,” he said.

So what do these patients make of each other? For Jenejasoriah and Punnuthuraih (and their absent inmate), life outside the island is impossible to imagine. They are unsure of their ability to live within a community.

It was Jenejasoriah, who took my notebook in his stubby misshapen fingers and scribbled nonsense to show me he could not remember how to write, who put it best.

“Even if I go home, even if I find them [family] I’m afraid they will not take me back. They will hate me.”

Cover Photo: Ponniah Punnuthuraih in his room, with Sena Jenejasoriah’s pet cats. Photo credits: Roar Media/ Kris Thomas

Popular politics has a lot to do with perception: candidates vying for votes will do all they can do to position themselves as capable and strong leaders. And during an election—such as the one we are heading towards—this is most easily achieved through imagery: it is not uncommon for candidates to use every possible avenue to be seen and to communicate their messages and promises to as many people as possible.

In this melee, perhaps one of the more important ways of assessing candidates’ capabilities is often overlooked—a candidate’s manifesto, which is his or her contract with the people. It is through a manifesto that a candidate enlarges his or her vision for the future and makes commitments to the people he or she hopes to win over. But in the headlong, often tumultuous rush towards an election, it is often easy to neglect to read what is actually contained in the pages of manifestos.

To make things easier for our readers, we selected five of the candidates with the most comprehensive manifestos for a quick comparison. Do note, this is not an endorsement of any of the candidates, but a selection of the front runners and an effort to compare their manifestos: what do each of them have to say about key issues like national security, economy, corruption, constitutional and legal reforms, women and lgbtqia+ rights?

It is impossible to represent in full, the contents of each manifesto, so we have summarised the key issues as concisely as possible. We apologise if any summary misses out on what supporters of that candidate feels are important issues—it was not done intentionally. We also do encourage you to read the manifestos in-depth, before the election, for a deeper understanding, and to make a deeper, educated choice.

Please click on image to enlarge.

Artwork—Jamie Alphonsus

Although Sri Lanka was granted universal franchise in 1931—making it possible for all those above the age of 21 to vote—(later amended to 18, in 1959), voting is not compulsory and there are many that choose to stay at home rather than participate on election day.

Voter turnout has therefore varied over Sri Lanka’s 37-year-old Presidential election history. In 1988, it was a mere 55.32% (owing largely to the JVP insurrections), but in 2015 it hit an all-time high of 81.52%, when electing President Maithripala Sirisena.

The state spends an enormous amount of money to accommodate eligible voters—on the premise they will participate in the process. (This year the figure has increased significantly with the inflation of candidates to 35 —Rs. 7 billion will be spent this year).

But what causes a fair percentage of the population to resist participating in a political process that is designed to represent their will?

“Disillusionment with politics is a worldwide trend,” political scientist and an emeritus professor at the University of Colombo Jayadeva Uyangoda told Roar Media, “We see this in other South Asian countries—as well as in Western countries.”

However, in comparison to other South Asian countries, Sri Lanka has a high rate of political participation. “Despite a very high disillusionment with the government—because of corruption, false promises, and abuses of power—people still however actively participate in politics,” Professor Uyangoda said. “This doesn’t just involve voting in elections but also joining political parties, engaging in debates and sharing viewpoints on social media.”

Professor Uyangoda attributed this to three things: a long history of universal suffrage, entrenched political parties, as well as the small size of the country. However, it is clear that participation in political life also differs between different demographics.

According to political economist, Ahilan Kadirgamar, weak social institutions play a significant role in voter apathy.

“In rural areas, voters engage regularly with various social institutions, the multitude of ‘samithi’ and ‘samagam’. When it comes to elections, this networking helps mobilise the communities for positive participation,” he said.

The situation is different among the urban populace.

“The whole point of democracy is the peoples’ participation. Among the urban locales, it is rare to see communities and individuals engaging with social institutions, thus leading to weak networking and ultimately, a lack of interest in the system,” he said.

“Weakening of social institutions is the biggest contributor to voter apathy,” he reiterated, explaining that even while the urban poor would engage with such institutions as a means of survival, with the lower-middle and middle class, that collusion is non-existent.

Although many shrug off their civic duty on the assumption their individual vote will make little difference, making a conscious effort to vote has very real consequences for our lives.

It affects access to healthcare and education, the distribution of wealth, the social and political climate of the country, and even civil rights. Not voting means, in essence, you are not utilising the opportunity to elect individuals who will represent you in the governing process.

There is truth to the idea that compulsory voting results in a higher degree of political legitimacy through higher voter turnout: if all or most of the registered number of voters participated in the election, the legitimacy of the election becomes concrete.

In Belgium, which has the oldest existing compulsory voting system, those who fail to vote can face prosecution and a moderate fine. If the behaviour is consecutive, they can lose the right to vote in 10 years. In Australia, as well, there is a penalty of AUD 20 for not voting.

Although former Deputy Elections Commissioner, M. M. Mohamed, proposed implementing such a fine in 2017, voting remains a non-compulsory act in Sri Lanka, and increasing voter turnout will have to involve other measures.

There isn’t one magical strategy to increase voter turnout. Instead, multiple tactics have to be used to encourage voter participation incrementally.

Studies have shown that making voter registration easier increases turnout, noting that “making registration portable can boost turnout by more than two percentage points,” while “allowing citizens to register at their polling place on election-day increases turnout by typically 5 to 7 percentage points.”

Turnout can also improve by making voting easier through more available absentee polling and improved access to polls, such as increasing the number of possible voting locations or lowering the average time voters have to spend waiting in line.

However, some scholars have stated that these practical measures only bring marginal improvements.

Instead, they advocate improving the electorate’s representativeness and understanding of policy issues. Increasing the voters’ participation with democratic processes gives them a greater stake in an election and a more personal reason to vote.

Individuals such as Kadiragamar have noted that if the state were to strengthen the relationship between communities with their respective social institutions, the matter of voter apathy can be removed.

“It’s not enough to have awareness meetings or group meetings. There have to be proactive measures to build a relationship,” he said. “That includes establishing community centres and incentivising engagement, in order to encourage participation. Rebuilding social bonds and standards will go a long way.”

A whopping 35 candidates have decided to run for the Presidency in Sri Lanka this year. This is a record number—the highest previously in 2010—when 22 entered the fray. Although a multi-party system, Sri Lankan politics has been historically dominated by two parties and it is typically the contenders from the two strongest parties or alliances that have commanded the race. This year, however, a number of fresh contenders have entered—making a third party alternative a viable option, and leading also to speculation that no one party, alliance or candidate will secure the majority, thereby necessitating a recount of second and third preferences. An election is always an important event—the very few times a citizen exercises his or her franchise, and this election is no different. But while some candidates effortlessly dominate the headlines, others fall into obscurity—so here is a quick update of the most basic information you need to know, plus some, about each of the candidates.

Remember, this election, your first, second AND third preferences will count. So educate yourself, and vote wisely!

You've heard of Nietzsche, Descartes and Sarte. But have you heard of these Sri Lankan philosophers?

A 65-year-old proposal to provide freshwater to the Jaffna peninsula, may finally become a reality.

The congregation at the Zion Evangelical Church in Batticaloa on Easter Sunday morning had only one thing in mind: worshiping their resurrected Lord and Savior. But in a fleeting moment, an explosion ripped through the concrete and steel, killing thirty-one. Fifteen were children.

The simultaneous attack on churches across the country left the Christian and Catholic community shaken: Why were they targeted? What had they done wrong? But despite the very real assault to their faith, worshippers of the Zion Evangelical Church continued to return to worship.

But six months since the brutal attack, they are still without a church. Instead, they are met with the unfinished skeleton of an edifice that was once their place of worship. The renovations at the Zion Evangelical Church are far from complete.

The impact of the explosion is still visible; the military personnel carrying out construction, point to the spot at which the suicide bomber was stopped by Ramesh Raju— a member of the congregation, who was suspicious of the backpack-carrying man, who wanted to enter.

The pockmarks left by the shrapnel are a crude reminder of the horror of the incident.

The Zion Evangelical Church is one of the three churches that were attacked by terrorists affiliated to the extremist Islamic groups, the National Thowheed Jamath and the Millathu Ibraheem.

And while renovations for the two other churches—St. Anthony’s Church in Colombo 01 and St. Sebastian’s Church in Katuwapitiya, Negombo— was completed a month after the allocation of funds, the Zion Evangelical Church is yet to rise from the ashes.

Reconstruction began in June, with the allotment of Rs. 29 million by the President’s Office, under the supervision by the Ministry of Housing. The work was supported by the Sri Lanka Army and the State Engineering Corporation.

But six months since there is still no indication reconstruction will conclude anytime soon.

Speaking to Roar Media, Michelle Mahesan, wife of the chief minister of the church, Pastor Roshan Mahesan explained, “The reconstruction went through several delays. The plan for the renovations [were] juggled between the Batticaloa Municipal Council and the Urban Development Authority. They only started working on it after the other churches were complete.”

She explained how the church was used for sermons every Sunday. “Every Sunday morning we would have Sunday school for the children, and afterwards the service,” she said. “On weekdays we would have Bible studies at our church and other various other events. But not anymore.”

The church has been leasing a reception hall to conduct their weekly meetings.

Mahesan reiterated, “Whatever facilities we had, has now reduced a lot. The plan they are building according to, is an old plan. Many of the additional extensions we had won’t be there when the work is finished. We were able to seat around 1,050 people inside the premises. We don’t think that will be the case now.”

While the reconstruction is scheduled to be completed by December 2019, there is little hope this will be the case.

“We fear that the election would only increase the delay,” Mahesan said. “If the Government changes, the Treasury will not release the funds that will help the construction.”

Following the attack, the church was flooded with sympathy and assistance. At the entrance, is still the memorial banner hung in the immediate aftermath of the attack, containing the photos and names of the victims.

Despite the struggles, Mahesan avers the church will continue with its faith. “Everyone is in the process of coming to terms with what happened. They know their God and they have not let Him go. Our faith is strong. The rest of the community is also helpful. They are more sympathetic and more protective than ever,” she said.

Photo credits: Roar Media/Kris Thomas  
Cover—Roar Media/Roel Raymond

Every morning and evening, crowds pour in and out of the country’s railway stations, as people hurry home or to work. But lately, they are faced with abandoned railway stations, bereft of staff, filled with people desperate for a way to travel.

The muffled voices that blare the arrival and departure of trains over the PA system is eerily silent. The only noise is the shuffling of feet and the grousing mouths, complaining and protesting. People are unhappy—it is clear the trains are not coming.

It has been over a week, since on September 25, a collective of the railway and locomotive trade unions walked out, refusing to work after talks with authorities over salary anomalies failed. It came at a time when protests from several other sectors were being played out simultaneously, severely crippling public administration.

And while several of the other strikes—which include the Ceylon Teachers’ Services Union and the Sri Lanka Administrative Service Association—have called off or postponed their protests, the railway strike continues.

Sri Lanka Railway employs 14,885 people. These include engine drivers, guards, station masters, and supervisors who are all participating in the strike action. As a result, only nine of the approximately 300 trains that run daily are moving, leaving people stranded and angry.

The Sagarika, Ruhunu and Gaalu Kumari, which transport a large section of the country’s working-class, have not been running since day one, and serious concerns have been raised over the overcrowding of existing trains.

Twenty retired employees are currently keeping the service running at its bare minimum, and reports are that the Department of Railways has lost approximately Rs. 110 million in revenue over the last eight days.

Short of acceding to demands, the government has done all it can to force employees back to work, declaring train service an essential service, and informing striking employees that they would be considered as having vacated their posts for not reporting to work for 48 hours, without issuing prior notice.

Afraid of the growing tensions, military and police protection was called in as a precaution to prevent any clashes between the railway commuters and the workers.

Since the strike action began, countless passengers have been faced with difficulties in finding a way to travel.

Many commuters who travel back and forth between Colombo and their homes in the suburbs and beyond, prefer the comfort and the efficiency of the train to the bus.

And when the trains are removed from the equation, desperation takes over, as a result of which, many resort to daredevil acts of riding on the footboards of the train carriages.

Making matters worse, inconvenienced passengers are made to brave the torrential monsoonal rains that have been flooding the island, as they wait for the few trains plying the route they take.

With no end to the strike in sight, there is no telling when things will getter better for people who are dependent on public transport, and it is manifestly clear a solution must be found.

Photo Credit: Roar Media / Nazly Ahmed

The government has granted the green light for excavations to commence at the Karasnagala mine in Aththanagalla, after a break of more than 70 years. Sri Lanka is renowned for the purity of its graphite, a mineral which is currently in high demand, particularly from the electric car industry.

Deep in the forests of the Amazon, wildfires burn fiercely. The magnitude of the damage is yet unknown, but so widespread over northwest Brazil, that the fire was visible from space. The massive forest has burned for over seven weeks continually now, sparking a global conversation on heightened carbon dioxide emissions affecting the climate.

As one of the world’s largest carbon dioxide ‘sinks’—a natural reservoir that removes CO2 from the atmosphere and replaces it with oxygen—the burning of the Amazon will contribute to an exponential increase in global temperatures.

But as the world watched the Amazon burn, fifteen thousand kilometres away, in Sri Lanka, Ella was on fire.

Deshan Ratnayake, a resident of Ella, said forest fires are a common occurrence. “This happens every year in the range borders on the Mountain Reserve,” he told Roar Media. “Last year, a fire erupted on the mountain opposite to my home, and spread within a few hours.”

Ratnayake said that the fires were caused by residents trying to clear land for paddy cultivation, as well as those that set fire to the forest to smoke out small animals that could be hunted for meat.

“People are never arrested for these kinds of things,” he said. “And many pay off the Police in order to escape arrest.”

The fire at the Ella Rock forest reserve was first reported on August 22 morning. By that time, the Amazon forest fire has been burning for three weeks and the local incident, which otherwise fails to garner national attention, quickly gained the attention of the public and the authorities.

The Disaster Management Centre’s (DMC) Badulla District Assistant Director E. M. L. Udaya Kumara told Roar Media that since August 22, three fires were reported in the area, and devastated approximately 20 acres of the Reserve.

“The first fire was reported with the Ella rock in its epicentre, on August 24. Another broke out at the Maragalakanda forest reserve, several kilometres south, and firefighters found it difficult to reach the fire in order to douse it at first,” Kumara said, explaining that the fire has also caused rocks to fall on to the Ella-Wellawaya main road endangering motorists passing through.

The windy conditions that prevailed at the time, Kumara noted, was one reason why the fire in Ella spread so quickly. However, firefighters, with the assistance of residents, wildlife officers and the members of the Sri Lanka Air Force based at the Diyatalawa camp, brought the fires under control.

“The third fire was reported within the vicinity of the Ravana Ella [three kilometres north of the Ella Rock] on August 25,” Kumara said, adding that the DMC had deployed teams to control and douse the fire immediately. “With the assistance of the Sri Lanka Army, we managed to douse the fire later that day,” he said.

It is of some concern that wildfires have begun to occur frequently in many areas in the dry zones of the country. “Fires are expected during June, July and August when the weather is especially dry,” Kumara explained. “[And] depending on how the monsoons shift, we have officers ready to combat any and all activities in the areas.”

However, the situation is far more severe than imagined. Earlier this year, the DMC reported that man-made forest fires have increased one hundred percent. And while the unmitigated fires cause immense damage to human settlements and flora and fauna in the short-term, it has various long-term consequences as well.

The more serious of these is the damage to the ecozone it erupts in.

“There are many water bodies connected to the streams and such that run through Badulla. A forest fire contaminating these streams would mean that water everywhere would be affected,’’ Kumara explained. This results in a lack of drinking water and a huge maintenance cost is incurred for clean up. An algae bloom— or a rapid increase of algae in water due to the high presence of nutrients following a forest fire can also lead to contamination of water resources.

Statistics indicate that while 58 cases were reported in 201, the number had doubled to 102 by the next year. Alarmingly, in April, even before the midpoint of 2019, 50 forest fires were reported.

This July alone, over 500 acres of forest cover was destroyed in a fire in the Monaragala district. And as Additional Conservator General of Forests at the Forest Department Lal Abeygunasekara pointed out— in Sri Lanka, wildfires do not erupt naturally.

“All the wildfires that break out are due to human activity. And the laws against those who cause forest fires are extremely severe. Strict action can be taken against those who induce wildfires under the Forest Conservation Act,” he said.

But it is clear, the Forest Conservation Act is not implemented strictly enough to prevent recurring, and increasing forest fires

“It’s almost impractical to find and arrest suspects who start these fires,” Abeygunasekara explained further.

The Ella Police reported the August fire had erupted at an isolated area adjacent to the forest Reserve. Investigators have concluded that whatever the cause of the fire, the speed in which it spread was directly due to the dry period that the area was experiencing. And due to these factors, Forest Conservation Act notwithstanding, no arrests have been made thus far.

Cover image—A similar wildfire that occurred in Ella last year, was caught by travellers Luminita and Costi, from SunChase Journey. & edits by Roar Media/Jamie Alphonsus

An unusual cat roams Colombo. What brings it to the city?

Created as an alternative to the conventional hotel room experience, Capsule hotels (or pod hotels) are now becoming popular in Sri Lanka. For the traveller on a budget, these hotels can be a very attractive alternative to the traditional lodging options.

A Moratuwa University student in his early twenties ended his life earlier this year after being subject to the depravity of “ragging”. He left behind letters, documenting in excruciating detail, the acts of torture he was subjected to. A similar experience was recounted just this July, when Darshana Udayanga, a second-year student of the Ruhuna University, finally came out the public.

‘A group of students that belonged to a union forcibly entered my hostel room at night. They lifted me up, took me outside the room, stripped me naked and subjected me to inhumane sexual harassment. After this incident, I fell ill. I left the hostel and stayed with my friends. I was admitted to Gampaha Hospital because I got sick,’ he related to the press.

Ragging at universities make the headlines every year—especially when it ends up in a casualty. But after having become a brief spectacle, it is forgotten once more until the next casualty or gory detail is unearthed.

“Whether ragging leads to suicide or injury or trauma it has to be considered as a criminal act,” Professor Uma Coomaraswamy, Director of the Centre for Gender Equity and Equality, Prevention of Sexual Harassment and Ragging at the University Grants Commission (UGC) said.

“And the UGC is doing what [it] can, providing relief to students when possible and investigating complaints.”

One such strategy adopted by the UGC—the apex body tasked with regulating higher educational institutes in Sri Lanka—is the online ragging complaint platform. Professor Coomaraswamy told Roar Media the infrastructure for the portal was put in place in September 2016 and became operational in January 2017. Since then, the site has gone through several changes, and now even specifically accepts and addressess sexual harassment complaints in addition to ragging. Alongside the portal, a hotline that was set up in 2018, for students to call in with their complaints.

Professor Coomaraswamy told Roar Media the support offered by the UGC didn’t end there. “Any student can contact me directly,” she said. “They can bring in letters, they can send in a proxy or they can, themselves, show up and complain.” And it falls on Professor Coomaraswamy to ensure the necessary steps have been taken to address the issue. “The Vice Chancellors report back to me with what action has been taken,” she said. “Every three [to] six months, we call for reports.”

While the individual universities are tasked with investigating and addressing complaints, and the UGC will oversee and direct the process—intervening when needed, only to transfer a student who has undergone severe ragging to another university. “The UGC chairperson will look at the student’s Z score and look for an appropriate university to transfer the student,” Professor Coomaraswamy said, admitting, however, that the transfers were a complex area, as there were times the student’s Z score doesn’t meet the requirement at the university they want to be transferred to. In these cases, the student is left with the option of either dropping out or continue with their degree, risking the ragging.

While ragging is in violation of the country's Constitution, and authorities must be swift to respond and reprimand offenders, the trend has been for university administration and law enforcement authorities to overlook these complaints.

The Police is empowered by the Prohibition of Ragging and Other Forms of Violence in Educational Institutions Act No. 20 of 1998 to inquire into ragging complaints. But very rarely do they exercise these powers.

Whenever a complaint of ragging is reported to a university, the administration is required to commence an inquiry and refer the case to the nearest Police station. While it is the university’s policy to inform the Police of these cases, more often than not, Professor Coomaraswamy found, that was not what happened.

“When a complaint is lodged with the Police, the first party they summon is the university administration—they are then asked to talk to the two parties and come to a settlement. Some universities would not bother with the complaint, they would bring the two parties—the grieved and the accused—and would ask them to talk and come to a settlement. How do you do that?” she asked, insisting that universities have to follow the law to ensure that action is taken against the accused and the victim receives relief.

The UGC’s ragging complaint portal is only two years old. In that period, over 800 complaints of ragging and sexual harassment have been recorded at the database mantained by the Centre.

But the Centre was unable to reveal how many cases they were able to successfully resolve. “It doesn’t work like that,” Professor Coomaraswamy said. It’s a process that is derived from within the universities, since they are autonomous bodies.The UGC doesn’t really act on its own because it has to work within the system.”

She pointed out that while the UGC had the power to address complaints of severe ragging, it has not done so thus far, because they prefer to work together with the Vice Chancellors of the respective universities.

But the UGC has been in consultation with the Attorney General’s Department to change this.

“At the moment, the UGC is acting within the parameters of the law. But we are also looking forward and working towards enhancing the work we do. The UGC is preparing to appoint a committee that will investigate into all ragging complaints and come up with possible resolutions,” Professor Coomaraswamy said.

According to the Professor, the proposed committee will include, in addition to representatives from the UGC and the Attorney General’s Department, representatives from the National Police Commission and the Ministry of Higher Education.

But as she pointed out, results are not easy to come by. Every year, approximately 2,000 students of an estimated 30,000 gaining university entrance drop out due to ragging—meaning that one out of 15 students are subjected to ragging by seniors.

“We [UGC] is trying to do something. They come to us and we try to give them relief. This didn't happen before. Now people know there's a place they can go to. I don't say these sadists fear us. But still, there is a decrease to the less violent raggers, who are afraid to commit these acts,” Professor Coomaraswamy said.

Perhaps one of the biggest obstacles authorities face is the wide acceptance that ragging is, despite its inherent violence, an “initiation ritual” used for the purpose of "breaking the ice" and familiarising newcomers with the rest of the student body. But initiation rituals have drastically changed from the harmless to the sadistic and violence over the years.

“We know the sadistic and inhumane acts these students are subjected to, Professor Coomaraswamy said. “Now, ragging is not ragging that people once knew. It's not the same thing that was there during the 1960-1980s. What's happening now is utter torture—physical and psychological. It's driving people to suicide. And that goes on for four years.”

Cover —gq-magazine.co.uk

Every so often since 2015, the proposed Animal Welfare Bill seeking to refine existing legal frameworks protecting urban animals and pets, gets its fifteen seconds of fame before being forgotten once again. The proposed Bill is considered the only comprehensive piece of legislature that ensures the safety of animals—domestic or otherwise. It is the only available alternative to outdated provisions in the Ordinance for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals of 1907 and the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance of 1937.

These legislations are unclear and insufficient, and as a result, animal welfare is largely neglected. It often takes a particularly gruesome case to bring the issue to light.

The inhumane burning of the Labrador Charlie last year horrified the nation — but it wasn’t enough to push the Animal Welfare Bill through.

Every year, numerous cases of cruelty towards animals are reported, sparking protests by animal welfare groups and concerned citizens. But with inadequate legislation, the legal framework has few solutions to prevent or end the abuse of animals.

This is but one part of the problem. Scores of animals—dogs, cats, cattle and horses —are abandoned every year by their owners. Neglected and mistreated, they are the silent victims of human violence.

All over Sri Lanka, are pet shops managed by small-time vendors, selling kittens, puppies, birds, rabbits, guinea pigs and various exotic fish.

Crammed into cages and tanks that have barely any space to hold them, these creatures are sold at top-notch prices. A pedigree puppy, depending on the breed, can cost up to Rs 50,000 or more, while the price for a purebred cat could go up to Rs 25,000. The shops may be small, but the business is definitely booming.

There are a few ways to acquire a pet in Sri Lanka. These include the small, unregulated pet shops you find everywhere, advertisements in the newspapers and adoption through animal rescue shelters. None of these avenues is strictly regulated by law.

Pet shops are not registered under any institution or regulatory authority. While they may have a business registration, it is important to note that pet shops are not licensed to sell animals since the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance prohibits the commercial sale of animals. The online sale of pets does not count as a licensed sales method either.

The second option would be to obtain a pet from an animal shelter—an altruistic or charitable organisation that rescues street animals and offers them up for adoption. The existing legal framework does not shed any light on how these organisations are expected to be regulated. They don’t stipulate, for instance, how large a shelter needs to be to house a certain number of animals, or what basic amenities it should provide. At the same time, shelters rarely enjoy institutional support when it comes to managing and caring for animals.

Indira Sahadevan runs the privately funded Cat Protection Trust in Gampaha. The Trust, founded in 2012, acts as a social service organisation, with the purpose of eradicating the spread of rabies in the country. Sahadevan told Roar Media that shelters in the country face a number of challenges due to the lack of recognition and regulation.

“I believe regulation is essential. The shelters require more comprehensive regulations that will allow better veterinary services to come in and better resources in order to ensure the care of creatures,” she said. “What is happening right now is people don’t have a problem with abandoning their pets with us. But they also go on to complain that such shelters are a nuisance.”

At present, her shelter is home to 70 dogs and 90 cats. Sahadevan says that the shelter is at the brink of overcrowding. “I first started this specifically to care for cats. But now I have dogs that were abandoned in front of my doorstep. These animals get sick quite often and they are sensitive. They need more space which I cannot provide,” she said.

The neglect and cruelty of animals in pet shops and animal shelters is but one link in a chain of torture which begins at the hands of the breeder.

There are active ‘puppy mills’, where commercial breeding takes place for profit. Here, dogs are used for factory-style breeding, under pitiful conditions. Females are repeatedly impregnated and made to produce litter after litter of puppies to be sold at exorbitant prices. These mills act without proper regulation, and lack the basic conditions for pet breeding. In fact, Sri Lanka does not have an authoritative body that is charged with monitoring the condition of puppy mills at all.

According to environmental lawyer and activist, Jagath Gunawardena, the amended Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Ordinance, No. 13 of 1907, sets out the provisions with which to take action against these ventures. “The Ordinance states that any person who ill-treats, overdrives, overrides, abuses or tortures [an animal] or if any animal is found in any place suffering pain by reason of starvation, mutilation or other ill-treatment, can be held accountable for these actions. This is enough to take action against these ventures. However, the existing law only discusses violations, which means that there are no clear cut methods that are documented in order to prevent such acts. That’s what is lacking in the legal framework,” he said.

Gunawardena cited two incidents in Kirulapone and Kotte where the Ordinance was called into play to shut down two shops accused of exploiting animals, sometime in 2004 and 2005. Similarly, there have been other instances where pet shops were closed down, based on complaints made to the relevant authorities, he said. Recently, a pet shop in Mount Lavinia was closed down after it was found that the death of a dog was caused by sheer negligence and ill-treatment.

Following the death of Charlie in the latter part of 2018, the discussion surrounding the proposed Animal Welfare Bill resurfaced and attracted major public support. However, halfway through the year, lobbyists have still not made any significant leeway in adopting it.

The proposed Bill first reached the limelight in 2006, when it was proposed that the existing Ordinance, which was over a hundred years old, needed to be changed. The provisions of the Ordinance assigned a ridiculously low fine of Rs. 100 for violations or imprisonment as a deterrent.

The proposal to amend the Bill was met with severe opposition at the beginning. According to Gunawardena, opposition came from religious groups and communities that practised the slaughter of animals at home.

Under the proposed new law, people who abandon animals on the roads and temples after using them for breeding, those that imprison animals in kennels without giving them adequate freedom, and abuse or neglect them, will be subject to penalty. The Bill introduces the duty of care on every person who is in charge of animals. The draft Act also stipulates a fine of Rs. 100,000, as well as a one-year prison sentence for violations.

Earlier this year, speaking at a media briefing, the former President of the Bar Association of Sri Lanka (BASL), President’s Counsel U. R. de Silva told Roar Media that a ten-member National Animal Welfare Authority would be set up as recommended in the Bill. The Authority will comprise a lawyer, veterinarians practising both western and eastern medicine, academics and leading activists who are passionate about animal welfare.

However, efforts to appoint the committee has proven futile.

“The proposal to appoint and create the National Animal Welfare Authority was made during the last few months of my tenure as the president of BASL ended,” de Silva said. “Since then, so many matters have challenged the progress of the appointment, including the Easter Sunday attacks and the political situation in the country. I have been assisting the current BASL president to make this a reality but we are at a difficult position since the authorities are not interested.”

Attorney-at-law Senaka Weeraratna, who was the former legal consultant on animal welfare legislation to the Law Commission of Sri Lanka, noted that the legislation has faced roadblocks because it is not considered a priority. “In other countries, people take pride in working for the welfare of the animals. However, here, no one takes the side of the animals in parliament except for a handful. Why? Because animals have no votes, no money and no clout.”

Cover —Kris Thomas

The unexpected question caught Samadhi\* (22) off guard, and she paused a moment before answering. The composure she had displayed thus far cracked, and her eyes welled up.

“People make mistakes,” she answered finally. “[But] that doesn’t mean they have to be murdered.”

Samadhi’s mother, Kumudini\* (42), was arrested in 1999 for possessing 150 mg of heroin. Samadhi doesn’t believe her mother ever did drugs. She told Roar Media the contraband belonged to her father, who had refused to take responsibility.

Kumudini was sentenced to death in 2011. “She was pregnant at the time, so the order was reduced to two life sentences. I couldn’t bear it. I collapsed when I heard the news,” Samadhi recalled.

Kumudini’s younger brother was born in prison, and is now seven years old. It's Samadhi, who, together with the help of relatives, takes care of her younger siblings. Their father absolved himself of all responsibility and kicked the children out in May last year.

But even as Samadhi and her younger sister and brother struggle to come to terms with the loss of their mother and the abandonment by their father, a new fear grips their hearts. With President Maithripala Sirisena announcing his intention to enforce the death penalty, they may lose Kumudini forever.

The last time the death penalty was imposed in Sri Lanka was in 1976. The sentence has since been automatically commuted to life behind bars. But President Sirisena interest in imposing capital punishment has brought up a gamut of issues, not least the question of if it is morally justified.

This is not the first time President Sirisea has wanted the death penalty imposed. He brought the matter up in 2015, to deter rising crime, particularly the rape and murder of four-year-old Seya Sandewmi. But nothing came of that announcement.

Now, despite criticism and a heavy backlash, he seems intent to revive capital punishment, this time, in a bid to crackdown on drug smuggling. A private member motion to declare the death penalty illegal has also been dismissed as illegal.

The Ministry of Justice, the trial judges and the Attorney General’s Department have identified over 450 death row inmates, 30 of whom are convicted on drug-related charges, and the President has greenlighted death to be imposed on three selected men and a woman.

For Samadhi, this is chilling news: because the President has held back from revealing who the selected criminals are, there is no guarantee her mother will not be one of the four on whom the death penalty will be imposed.

Samadhi is not the only one unhappy about the coming course of action. The family of four-year-old Seya Sandewmi is enraged with the President’s seeming duplicity, arguing that capital punishment should be imposed on criminals convicted of rape and murder first.

“If it is being implemented on them [drug smugglers], why not [on] these child molesters and murderers?” Seya’s 40-year-old father asked Roar Media. “Especially when it has been proved with DNA.”

Although Seya’s murderer was sentenced to death in 2016, his sentence was commuted to life behind bars, which is the norm.

“Just because he is in prison doesn’t mean there is any difference,” Seya’s father said bitterly. “When he was out of prison also, it wasn’t like he lived decently. But at least he had to work for his money. Now he is in prison and eating and drinking on our money.”

Further compounding issues is the fact that death has not proved an effective deterrent to crime.

Writing to the Sunday Times, Forensic Specialist Professor Ravindra Fernando reiterated the widely accepted argument— ‘there is no evidence that the death penalty is any more effective in reducing crime than life imprisonment.”

So widely accepted is this, that only 53 of the 193 countries of the world currently still impose capital punishment—Madagascar (2015), Benin (2016), Guinea (2017) and Burkina Faso (2018) being the most recent to abolish the death penalty.

The irreversibility of the death penalty and the high possibility for wrongful imprisonment— as suspected in the case of Kumudini—especially in countries with less-than-robust judicial systems and processes like ours, has also been flagged as a significant point of concern.

Sri Lanka’s justice system is riddled with long delays and systemic failures. As of 2018, 3, 486 cases were pending in the Supreme Court, 4, 817 in the Court of Appeal, 5, 890 in Civil Appellate High Courts and 16, 811 in High Courts.

Further to this, a whopping 167,945 and 535, 644 cases were pending in the District and Magistrates’ Courts respectively, and a further 5,048 in Labour Tribunals.

Just this year, in a study of seven emblematic cases in Sri Lanka, the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) noted large time lags, of over 10 years, in some cases, and called for better accountability in the country's justice system.

There is also the matter generally unconsidered: for instance, what happens to the families of those on whom the death penalty is imposed? Chairperson of the Committee for Protecting the Rights of Prisoners (CPRP), Attorney-at-law Senaka Perera said the state does not currently have a welfare programme for the benefit of families.

This means the families and any dependent of the incarcerated convict and the convict on whom the death penalty is imposed will continue to have to bear the economic burden and social marginalisation of the loss of a family member.

In the case of Samadhi, who already bears the economic burden of her family, social marginalisation has materialised well into her young life.

“When I was studying for my Advanced Level exam, a teacher in my school learned that my mother was on death row,” Samadhi told Roar Media. “She spread the information to the entire school. She told my friends to stop associating with me. My best friend was asked to stop being my friend. I couldn’t handle it. With six months left for the exam, I dropped out,” she said.

Samadhi’s and Seya’s stories are but a fraction of the larger picture. The fact is that the debate about capital punishment is far from being answered. And in an election year, there is a palpable risk of it becoming reduced to an electoral gambit.

Cover Photo Credit - transconflict.com

Last month, the literary world in Sri Lanka was set awash with grief when one of its titans, Jean Arasanayagam, passed away at the age of 87. A poetry and fiction writer, Arasanayagam was born Jean Solomons, in Kandy, on December 2, 1931.

Of her ancestry, Arasanayagam said, “...My father’s [side]—the ‘Solomons’—very academic, intellectual, moral, upstanding Methodists. On the other side, I had the ‘Grenier Jansz’—very genteel, but also intellectuals among them; artists, writers and poets and so on.”

Arasanayagam credited her family with influencing her greatly. “Everything was so ordered, so disciplined,” she said. “We are so turbulent in the expression of our emotions and feelings. But they had a marvellous sense of duty and responsibility—the womenfolk, especially.”

Arasanayagam had her early education at Girls’ High School, Kandy and her higher education at the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya, during the university’s ‘golden years’ in the 1950s, when Sir Ivor Jennings was at the helm.

“I remember talking to him when we were strolling about the campus,” she reminisced to writer Rajiva Wijesinghe, “with his walking stick, [asking us] how we were keeping..”

Having completed her education, Arasanayagam first joined the teaching staff at the Kurunegala Convent, and later, St. Anthony’s College, Katugastota—experiences she described as “rigid” and “alien” to her upbringing, although she “accepted it.”

Her own experiences growing up had been far more carefree, “ballroom dancing in the verandah...wonderful dinner parties...the homemade ginger beer, the love cake and the formal dinners,” she reminisced.

Arasanayagam was never happy with having her freedom curtailed, “We were all rebels in our family,” she said. “Absolute rebels. My mother couldn’t really cope with us because we did our own thing, all of us.”

It was this innate rebelliousness that led her to defy the wishes of her own father, by marrying fellow writer Thyagaraja Arasanayagam—a Tamil from the country’s northern peninsula.

Arsanayagam’s experience of marriage was also very different from her upbringing. “We were given absolute freedom, to discover love, or relationships,” she said, of her time growing up. But she felt her mother-in-law, who was very “rigid in her views” would have a hard time understanding that.

This tension between her experiences of identity and culture informed her writing, providing her with the perspective from which to critique complex society through poetry and prose.

The accolades she accumulated were many. These included a Premchand Fellowship at the Sahitya Akademi in India, a doctorate in letters from Bowdoin College in the USA, the Gratiaen Award in 2017 and the highest state honour ‘Sahityaratna’, for lifetime contribution to literature in Sri Lanka.

Arasanayagam, in the true spirit of an artiste, did not place much emphasis on these successes. In an interview with Newsfirst, she said, “... For me, awards, do not mean any kind of celebrity status or material gain. Those do not count in my agenda. It’s the creativity that inspires, and what through the years I have learned of giving one’s self and carrying on this mission to change the world—That’s what the writer has to do, without fear.”

Arasanayagam wrote a vast trove of poems and collections of short stories, and is credited with influencing entire generations of writers on the island. Harshana Rambukwella, a family friend and one among the many she inspired told Roar Media, “...She had a formative influence on my choice to follow literature. She was instrumental in introducing me to a literary world and later on, her poetry became the focus of my scholarly studies.”

Although her work dealt with many complex topics, colonial legacy, womanhood and identity among others, her ‘Apocalypse ‘83’, on the ethnic riots of 1983, is considered a seminal body of literature.

Arasanayagam and her husband ‘Arasa’ were forced to hide from the marauding mobs that were burning the houses belonging to Tamils, and were eventually relocated to a refugee camp.

“I understood that my sense of safety was forever imperilled, forever destroyed. You are never yourself again,” she said of that experience. “Since then I find myself constantly peering into the interstices of the past, trying to unpick all the threads.”

The late Professor Ashley Halpe, wrote in the foreward to her book, “The poems convey the gathering of the storm, the immediate violence, both as she saw it and through various personae, the forced contemplation of what had happened in the period in the refugee camps, the thought of exile— “can I rent a country / as I rent out a room? The recognition “I didn’t know this country.” (Exile 1)”—words that continue to find relevance decades later.

A medley of words recurring describe Arasanayagam: exuberant, charismatic, generous, opinionated. Her last neighbour, artist Yasmin Buckman recollected Arasanayagam as being a “colourful personality”.

“She [Arasanayagam] moved next door two or three years after my husband died in a vehicular accident,” Buckman told Roar Media. “My connection with Jean was instant. She was a warm-hearted person who loved my son dearly. She was very fond of us. She was caring of everyone she was close to. When I was faced with a problem, she was always there for me.”

“It was one of the many things brought up during her funeral,” she continued. “How she cared for people. There was a chair in her verandah, surrounded by a magnificent garden. Whenever she used to sit there, I could see her from the window. She would wave to me from her chair and I would go to her. We would spend hours enjoying each other’s company. I will dearly miss her.”

Arasanayagam was empathetic and described herself as a “poet who is human”, her only superpower being her rich imagination, captured succinctly in her short poem, ‘Poet’ —

She tells herself,

“I am common

Anonymous like all others

Here.

No one knows that I have magic

In my brain.”

Arasanayagam will be missed.

Cover—Tracy Holsinger

Roar Media/Jamie Alphonsus

Every year, approximately 300,000 students sit the GCE Ordinary Level examination in almost 11,000 schools across the country. The Ordinary Level qualification is a prerequisite for the more academically rigorous Advanced Level examination, which is a critical university entrance requirement.

After the exams are conducted, the Department of Examinations invariably conducts a survey. And the statistics show that since 2011, the number of students failing all subjects has reduced drastically.

Of the 270, 032 students who sat for the GCE Ordinary Level examination in 2011, 12, 795 — a percentage of 4.74 — failed in all subjects.

However, in 2018, when the number of candidates increased to 296, 029, the number of those who failed all subjects reduced to 5, 917–a mere 2 percent of the whole. According to the Examinations Department, this is an all-time low.

The situation is similar when it comes to the GCE Advanced Level examination.

In 2012, 196, 954 students sat the GCE Advanced Level examination. 15, 134 —a percentage of 7.68— failed in all subjects. But in 2018, that percentage reduced to 5.6%.

While it is clear the number of students failing has dropped, it is unclear what has contributed to that change, and if the decrease in failure amounts to greater higher education prospects for the students.

Commissioner-General of the Examination Department, Sanath Pujitha, told Roar Media that these positive results may be the consequence of changes made to the examination process in the last few years—the most constructive of which was to challenging subjects such as mathematics.

“Mathematics was one of the hardest subjects for the students, so a few years ago we made a few reforms to the paper,” he said.

“The Department made changes to the first and second parts of the subject [to] allow the student to obtain an ‘S’ [Simple Pass] grade from the first part of the paper. We made the paper easier for the student. We noticed that this made a huge difference in the failure rates,” he said.

Despite these changes by the Examinations Department, the Commissioner-General feels examinations in Sri Lanka still overlook the complexities of some of the subjects.

“Sri Lanka’s examination system is solely dependent on written exams and very rarely on practical aspects of the subject,” he said. “At the moment, we test a student’s practical skills only for a selected few aesthetic subjects such as music and dancing. But this is not enough,” he said, adding that he believes more students would perform better if further reforms were made.

If a student successfully passes the GCE Ordinary Level examination, they progress to the next stage, the GCE Advanced Level, where they obtain the basic qualifications necessary to apply for higher education.

But passing the GCE Advanced Level exam does not ensure students a place at state universities—many are unable to meet the high entrance requirements, calculated on the basis of a complex ‘z score’.

According to the Education Ministry’s performance report for 2013, 35.3% of the students who appeared for the 2012 GCE Ordinary Level examination were not eligible to progress to the next level because of low scores.

In 2018, over 18, 000 students out of the 321, 469 candidates who sat the exam, failed to qualify for university entrance. Last year, only 167, 907 candidates passed the exam and received university entrance—a percentage of 5.2, smaller than the percentage that failed the examination.

The problems in the sector are further complicated when students who have been the beneficiaries of 13 years of free education, plus four years of free tertiary education, find they are ill-equipped to meet the requirements of the current labour force, and expect the government to provide them with jobs.

These battles are often fought out on the streets in the form of debilitating, frequent protests by ‘unemployed graduates’, that are invariably met with forcible ejection using tear gas and water cannons as ammunition.

To address these issues, the Education Ministry recently proposed that 26 new subjects are introduced for the Advanced Level examination, to include subjects like engineering technology and bio-systems technology (that fall under the technology subject stream) and subjects like software and web development, psychology, tourism and hospitality.

The Education Ministry also observed in 2013, that if these issues are to be addressed early, books must be distributed in a timely manner, teachers must be provided with instructions manuals, and conduct rehearsal tests, and seminars for students.

The Education Department has also decided to prioritise STEM subjects and offer vocational training courses for final year students. This will allow students access to a wider variety of fields, empowering them for existing jobs in the economy.

Commissioner-General Pujitha claimed that these measures that have, or are in the process of being implemented, have contributed to reducing the numbers of students who fail their exams.

Investing in teachers is also considered of paramount importance to a healthy education system. Educators believe that in order to reform the examination structure and prepare students for the current workforce, there also needs to be an immediate improvement in teacher training facilities.

Shalini Wickramasuriya, an educational consultant, observed that standards for teacher training are not fixed in Sri Lanka, and does not benchmark best practices around the world. She pointed out that even the massive ‘Langama Paasala, Hondama Paasla’, or Nearest School Is The Best School (NSBS) national programme embarked on by the government to address inequalities in schools, did not touch on aspects of teacher training comprehensively.

“Teacher training under the ‘Langama Paasla, Hondama Paasala’ programme, takes place on a ‘needs’ basis. It does not play an important role in the project, [but] carried out only whenever there are syllabus changes, reforms to exam papers, curriculum changes and the like. It’s not an intense programme,” she said.

The NSBS, that was rolled out in 2016, focuses on providing equal educational opportunities and facilities to all children in the country by addressing gaps in the areas of constructions and repairs, human resource development and the provision of goods and equipment.

Over 10, 000 schools in the country are covered by NSBS, and there are currently over 18, 000 individual projects being implemented at a cost of Rs. 64 billion. As many as 3, 000 schools have been provided with mobile laboratories, in addition to training for science and math teachers.

“The intention of NSBS projects is to minimise the congestion in popular schools and provide all basic facilities to the nearest school and attract students to those institutes instead of overcrowding popular schools,” Wickramasuriya pointed out.

According to Examinations Department Commissioner-General Pujitha, discussions are currently underway to further reform the examination system. “The education and examination have gone through a number of changes in the last decade or so; most of them proposed and implemented sporadically. At the moment, the Education Minister Akila Viraj Kariyawasam has appointed a committee to inquire into taking preemptive measures with regard to reducing exam pressure in students,” he told Roar Media.

But despite the reforms that have already been rolled out and the prospect of more, better, changes Wickramasuriya noted that some aspects of exams have not changed at all.

“There are several exam papers in the GCE O/L examination that exceed five hours. Who could possibly perform adequately or to the best of their ability for over five hours at the age of 16?,” she asked. You’d be hard pushed to find a comparable length of paper anywhere else in the world.”

It is clear that while the government has been successful in reducing the numbers of those that fail their GCE exams, more structural reforms are necessary to address the existing issues and create and maintain a healthy education system.

Cover image credits: Josh Estey/ CARE

A weekday morning in Pettah. The incoming Southwest monsoon had brought with it a shower of rain, and dark clouds hanging heavy in the sky portend more to come. The narrow streets are muddy, the dust that usually coats it streets, dampened and turned turbid by rushing feet.

Pettah is usually a fusion of rushing porters, loud vendors and hurried commuters—and today is no different.

But in the mid to late 17th Century, the landscape was.

Pettah, then known as the Dutch Ouad Stad (Old City), was not the busy commercial area it is today, but a residential one, in which Burghers and other communities that served in the Dutch East India Company lived.

Pettah has long since transformed, and very few of the edifices from the Dutch period remain. These include the Dutch Museum, formerly the residence of Governor of Dutch Ceylon, Thomas van Rhee–and this hidden gem, a living anachronism—a building believed to have once been part of the Governor’s Stables.

But the entryway belies the history that lies inside.

Upon entering, you find a long corridor lined with old teak glass cabinets, containing various paraphernalia. Photo credits: Roar Media/Kris Thomas

It is here, that Nihal Senarath, Wickramasinghe and ‘Bala’—the three proprietors of the ‘Princely Press’, sit here and chat about this, that and the other.

On either side of the corridor are a multitude of doors that have been walled up.

“This building is over 200 years old, we think,” Wickramasinghe said. “And that horseshoe, right there, means that this was the stables for the Dutch Governor.”

This is contested—archaeologist Chryshane Mendis arguing that there is no proof that the building was the stables of Dutch Governor Thomas van Rhee—in the absence of evidence proving otherwise, the myth is commonly perpetuated and widely accepted.

When I asked Wickramasinghe why he doesn’t repair it, he laughed in my face.

While there is some dispute over the origins of the building—Mendis citing R. L. Brohier, in his Changing Face of Colombo, to point out that many of the residents of the Ouad Stad who owned horses had stables at the back of their homes—also pointing to the fact that the horseshoe was then a common symbol of luck, it is clear that the ‘Old Dutch Stables’, now home to the ‘Princely Press’ is a Colonial building worth preserving.

Pettah has gone through many changes, and will continue to evolve with time. What happens to living anachronisms like the ‘Old Dutch Stables’ now the ‘Princely Press’, remain to be seen.

What if you were given the chance to show dissatisfaction of political candidates who are taking part in an election? A proposal is submitted that seeks to do that.

“Are you ready?” the referee asks the fighter in the blue corner. The fighter nods, fists clenched, eyes locked on target. “Are you ready?” the referee asks his opponent in the red corner, who cracks his neck to relieve the pressure, and steps forward in response.

“Then, fight!”

The gloved fists meet in the middle and the brawl commences.

Aggressive and fast-paced, the fight stays in tempo with the pounding heavy metal sounds of Metallica blasting from the speakers.

Blood mixes with sweat and the crowd goes wild.

This is a ‘Fight Night’, held in the most unlikely of locations — the heart of Colombo.

Colombo Fight Night was initiated in 2011 by Dr. Haren Jayasinghe, who heads Sri Lanka Mixed Martial Arts (SLMMA), an organisation that teaches a combination of combat sports. Until then, the sport was relegated to a couple of gyms in Colombo, meant for practitioners with previous experience in other martial art forms.

MMA is a form of entertainment with roots in the Roman tradition of gladiatorial combat. But today, it is a reformed, refined and regulated full-contact combat sport, which uses techniques from various combat sports and martial arts, such as Muay Thai kickboxing, Brazilian jiu-jitsu and wrestling.

Colombo Fight Nights garnered attention and buzz at its inception. For many boxing and wrestling fans, the prospect of an MMA fight in Colombo was something to look forward to. But soon after, its popularity dwindled and with it's potential unrecognised, the sport was reduced to underground fights.

Prageeth Thoradeniya and Tithira Perera, both martial arts enthusiasts and instructors who co-founded The Shed, a space that offers training in MMA and a variety of other forms of combat sports, feel that it is unlikely the sport will receive mainstream attention in Sri Lanka, despite its rising popularity worldwide.

“Now it is globally popular. Everyone is watching UFC [the Ultimate Fighting Championship],” he said. “What we are lacking is national acknowledgement itself.”

For a particular sporting event to have national recognition, the practitioners must make a general showcase of public interest—which basically means getting a large crowd to buy tickets to an event and followers of the sporting event—after which the Ministry of Sports will move to bring it under their wing by forming a federation. And while the Sports Ministry currently has a number of sporting federations for martial arts—including wushu, taekwondo, sumo, sambo and kudo, among others—a federation for MMA is yet to be established.

Thoradeniya feels that until such time as the government takes the sport seriously, MMA will be confined to standalone, independent events. “Right now, a small group of gyms that practise MMA as a sport have held discussions with the Sports Ministry,” he said. “The Ministry had ‘unofficially’ acknowledged their presence, but we were advised to increase public interest through regional events, and it is only depending on the turnout that the Ministry will have a positive response towards us.”

A Resurgence Of Interest

Despite its failure to become quite as popular as its promoters hoped for in 2011, MMA is showing signs of reviving. In January this year, a new instalment of the Colombo Fight Night was held, when the Ceylon Fight Club organised an event at Royal MAS Arena. A number of combatants from The Shed, Knees & Knuckles, Brazilian Jiu Jitsu Sri Lanka and the MMA Gym—the only gym in Kurunegala to promote and practice MMA as a sport—participated in the event.

Malinda Amarasinghe (29), who practices under his sensei Priyantha Rajapaksa, was declared champion of the Under 73-kg event when he defeated Muay Thai practitioner Ajmal Yakoob (24). Amarasinghe, known to many as the local ‘Yuri Boyka’, is a champion boxer, national wushu champion and excels in karate. His focus now is on Muay Thai and promoting MMA.

But he is stung by the lack of support for the sport. “Boxing has a large number of followers. Even though sports like wushu and boxing are not practised in most schools, these sports are accepted nationally. I don’t think MMA will come into schools anytime soon. But that does not mean there are kids out there who are not interested,” he said.

Amarasinghe believes these kids must have the opportunity to learn a sport they are interested in. “But none of them [will] get an opening because no one cares about this sport. We need sponsors. We need recognition and representation. We can and would like to bring gold to the country and let the flag wave high,” he said.

Cover photo credit: Nazly Ahmed/ Roar Media

Felician Fernando is an accomplished diver, who, even at sixty, dives regularly as an instructor. And while Fernando spends most of his time diving off the beaches of Negombo, once a year—together with the family—he visits a grave at the bottom of the sea.

It all began when Fernando was contacted by a woman named Lesley Harker in 2012.

“Harker contacted me via email saying that her father had a request for me. They wanted me to take a bouquet of frangipani flowers to a gravesite at the bottom of the eastern sea,” he said.

Harker had explained that her father, Richard William Groom (89 at the time the email was sent), had been a deckhand aboard the vessel HMS Hermes, the world’s first aircraft carrier, which was commissioned by the United Kingdom.

Deployed during the Second World War, it was sunk in an attack carried out by Japanese air fleet, off the coast of Batticaloa.

On April 8, 1942, invasion by the Japanese Empire was imminent.

On the island of Ceylon, British forces were deployed on the ground. Off the coast of Trincomalee, the world’s very first aircraft carrier– the HMS Hermes–accompanied by Australian destroyer, HMAS Vampire, had commenced its journey to the Maldives to rendezvous with the rest of the British fleet.

The British troops in the Maldives, anticipating an attack similar to the Easter Sunday raid of Ceylon just a few days earlier, were preparing to defend themselves. But as fate would have it, HMS Hermes never reached the Maldives.

On April 09, 1942, a Japanese scout plane spotted the ship near Batticaloa and attacked it with a fleet of 70 dive bomber aircrafts. The HMS Hermes was immediately sunk in the attack.

The attack by the Japanese was devastating; 19 officers, including the captain of the ship, R. J. Onslow, and 278 others lost their lives.

The HMAS Vampire was also attacked and destroyed, when sixteen 250kg bombs that were dropped on the vessel by the Japanese fleet broke it in half, sinking it within 10 minutes of the HMS Hermes.

Vampire lost its Commanding Officer and eight sailors in the attack. However, many others survived and were later rescued by a patrolling hospital ship.

It was the legendary Sri Lankan scuba diver, underwater explorer and marine biologist, Rodney Jonklaas, who first discovered the wreck of the HMS Hermes in 1967.

It was Jonklaas who founded ‘Reefcombers of Ceylon’, one of the world’s first diving clubs in 1946, later assisting the National Aquatic Resources Research and Development Authority (NARA - est. 1981) with dives, in their mission to carry out research and development on Sri Lanka’s marine resources.

According to another pioneering Sri Lankan diver, Rex I De Silva, when Rodney located the Hermes at 60 metres underwater, it was without any gear or equipment. Having identified the wreck, Jonklaas returned with scuba gear, also taking with him a .357 magnum bang-stick (an underwater firearm) for protection against sharks. He would continue to visit the site often to assist researchers, journalists and writers, and of course, movie makers.

With the Sri Lankan civil war rendering the eastern seas untraversable, the location of the wreck would disappear from the minds of many. Having being forced to abandon their homes due to the raging war, the fishermen who frequented the spot for the multitudes of fish, would not return for another decade or so. And slowly but steadily, another 30 years would pass until the Hermes was once again visited.

Enter Felician Fernando, who has the honour of rediscovering the wreckage of the Hermes when the world had forgotten it.

“It was way back in 1986 that I dived for the first time in my life. That was 33 years ago, when I was training to be a diving instructor. [And] it was during my studies that I got to know about HMS Hermes,” he said.

After graduating, Fernando went on to make a name for himself as a diver and an instructor. But a desire to locate the Hermes burned strongly in him. “I wanted to find something new and exciting. So I started looking for the wreck and I combed the eastern coastline starting from Trincomalee,” he said.

But his search was futile — until he found his first eye-witness: Prince Casinader, a teacher, politician and writer.

“The administrative centre of the Batticaloa district was the Kachcheri, housed in the ancient fort,” Casinader wrote in an article for the Sunday Times in 2009. “The British ships were no match for the continued waves of Japanese planes, and as the first bombs hit the deck of the Hermes, she began to sink. A touching tragic scene was the heroic stance of the ship’s captain, Captain Onslow, who as the ship was sinking, stood at the salute with the Union Jack flying, to go down with his ship, not far from the lighthouse.”

With the assistance of Casinader, Fernando travelled to Batticaloa.

“No one had any landmarks because they had lost that information during the war. The location marked on the Admiralty charts and other nautical charts were also wrong,” Fernando said.

He said he was finally able to determine the position of the wreck with the information that was shared with him by Captain Edward Jayawardene, former Commander of the Eastern Naval Area.

Fernando described the very first dive in search of the Hermes as quite dangerous and life-threatening.

“The wreckage was supposed to be lying at a depth of 60 metres — according to the information. My equipment had a lot of restrictions and would only allow me to stay a limited amount of time underwater. If I had stayed longer, I would have drifted off into a nitrogen narcosis.”

Despite the challenges, on April 15, 2002, Fernando descended 60 metres into the Batticaloa sea and stepped on a box of ammunition. He immediately realised that this was it — it was the wreckage of the Hermes.

Fernando said he was surprised to see how well preserved the vessel was. “The environment had not caused any damage. I’ve made 2,400 logged dives in various places such as the Maldives, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and I have never seen such beauty,” he said.

While a variety of fascinating corals and giant sea-fans had grown around and all over it, the vessel remained a pristine, untapped nest for fish. “The ship was very well intact. It had tilted portside to the ground [but] the superstructure still had most of its guns and boxes of ammunition,” he said.

“The flight deck was destroyed, however,” he added.

Since his first discovery, Fernando has dived to the Hermes wreckage more than a thousand times — at least 100-125 times a year with trainees and other researchers.

But a majority of the wreckage still remains unexplored due to its status as a British war grave. Divers are restricted from extracting any artefacts and are prohibited from entering the wreckage.

“There were over 300 approximated secondary explosions during the attack that caused the vessel to sink. Those who did not escape died due to drowning. If you shine a light through the portholes, you can see the remains of those who did not survive the incident,” Fernando said. “Hermes captain, R. J. Onslow, who refused to leave the sinking ship was not rescued, and his remains are assumed to be still within the wreckage,” he said.

Now, Fernando has his sights on HMAS Vampire, which is yet to be found.

“Vampire lost nine men [but] the rest survived,” Fernando said. “ The wreckage was never found. Last year, there was a group of Australian researchers who used sonar technology to search the area, but [were] unsuccessful. We believe that the Vampire might be at the bottom of a 900-metre trench located close to the Hermes.”

“It’s impossible to dive that deep, however,” he said. “We need more powerful sonars to locate the vessel.”

Editor's Note: Roar had previously identified Felician as being retired—in fact, he is still active in his industry.

St Anthony's Shrine in Kochchikade celebrated its 185th feast on June 13 (Thursday). This was the first time the fully renovated church opened and conducted a ceremony after the devastating Easter Sunday attack.

The United Nations recently issued findings of sexually exploited children around the world. Sri Lanka was on the list where child prostitution has not changed since the 1980s.

Following the spate of violent incidents, the Government has decided to amend the legislature criminalising hate speech and fake news, in a much welcomed move.

Ravi, (55) a fisherman on the Wellawatte beach, remembers when the thick black sludge started washing ashore the beaches on the western coast of Sri Lanka.

It was a Sunday—June 2—and the usual crowds that are drawn to the beach on the weekend were there; tourists wanting to soak in the sights and sun, and families wanting to bathe and lunch by the sea.

“We told them there’s oil in the water but they didn’t listen to us,” Ravi told Roar Media.

Beachgoers found themselves covered in the oil when they came out of the water.

“There were children too, who were covered in the black residue. They had to wash themselves in kerosene before they left,” Ravi said.

Dr. B. P. Terney Pradeep Kumara, General Manager of the Marine Environment Protection Agency (MEPA), noted that the situation is called a ‘tarball effect’, where a mass of petroleum has ‘weathered’ after floating in the ocean. When exposed to elements like wind and water, petroleum undergoes physical changes and is scattered over a wider area.

The MEPA had only warned the public about a kilometre-long stretch on the Wellawatte beach being polluted, but the full extent of the oil slick was very visible by the next day. Trash coated in the tar and oil had washed up after the previous night’s high tide and was seen lining the Wellawatte beach stretch. A murder of crows, an unusual sight according to the residents of the beach, were seen flocking at the beach, scavenging the shored up trash.

Dr. Kumara told Roar Media that the situation arises when a vessel releases oil after cleaning — which is illegal.

“The oil substance is similar to the oil released from ships after a tank is cleaned. The act could either be an accident or deliberate. It nevertheless is criminal; therefore, the offenders can be fined up to Rs. 14 million. MEPA has also lodged a complaint with the Mount Lavinia Police in this regard, while the Coast Guard and Sri Lanka Navy are assisting investigations. We have received information as to the vessels that have travelled in the vicinity in the last few days but it’s a difficult task to determine which vessel committed the act,” he said.

When the MEPA was informed, it issued a public notice that Sunday morning, advising the public to exercise caution while using the beach.

The beach, which is a hotspot for joggers and tourists, was empty, and fishermen claimed there weren't any fish in the area either.

A few days after the cleanup operation, the beach strip from Wellawatte to Mount Lavinia has been now been declared open to the public, according to Dr. Kumara.

“What remains is a little amount that will not have a great impact on the environment. Cleanup operations were successful and it was called off due to the fact that it is impossible to clean small particles that have mixed with the sand,” he said.

Dr. Kumara said there was no visible impact from the incident on the local biosphere and noted that the consequences of the incident, if any, were not immediately quantifiable. He also said that MEPA had not yet received any complaints of major health issues as a result of the incident.

“This was not a large oil spill in comparison to previous accidents,” he said, referring to the 2018 oil spill in Muthurajawela. “What has been the problem is that it has caused a major inconvenience to the people. [The people] who come here for leisure, and residents who depend on the sea for a livelihood.”

The rain from the night before had transformed the mosque grounds in Negombo into a muddy quag. Tracks led us to three large white tents set up in a dry area, where the stench of sweat and mud made for an unpleasant combination.

There were some four dozen men, at first glance, crammed into the tent; some attended to the elderly, washing them and helping them put on their clothes, while others took shelter under the square white tents.

Rugs and paduru were strewn across wooden pallets on which they sat, talking to each other in hushed tones, while others cradled wailing babies in their arms. Many sat idly, watching, as children ran about with joy, oblivious to the misery around them.

These are foreign refugees who have been given shelter in Sri Lanka. The beach town of Negombo, in particular, has been a refuge for many of those escaping religious persecution in Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan since the 2010s. In the years since, the number of refugees—mostly Pakistani Ahmadis, Pakistani Christians and Shia Muslims—has increased exponentially.

However, in a harsh playback of their personal grief and history, they have once more become victims of persecution, this time in their host country. This has been a consequence of the backlash following the Easter Sunday terror attacks.

The Ahmadiyyas

M. Muneer Ahamed, a Sri Lankan social worker, is an imam at the Ahmadiyya mosque in Negombo. He currently acts as caretaker for over 1,000 Pakistani Ahmadiyya refugees escaping religious persecution in their country of origin. These refugees, who until Easter Sunday experienced a safe, if impoverished, existence, are now in a state of chaos and are internally displaced after local anger turned on them.

“The locals think that these refugees are fueling the terrorist movement,” Ahamed said. “But no one in this community is involved in the attacks. There is not a single record to prove these claims.” He put the tensions down to a fear of the ‘other’ or ‘outsiders,’ but said: “They are refugees because they are persecuted for their religious beliefs by their original governments. They are already under attack. So how can they be involved in these attacks?”

Many of the refugees in Negombo had been living in leased homes until Easter Sunday. Several Pakistani refugees, especially those living in the vicinity of the St. Sebastian’s Church, Katuwapitiya, had lived off donations from the church.

However, after the attacks, many have been asked to vacate their homes by landowners fearing a backlash from other locals. Their fears were not entirely unfounded — in the aftermath of the attack, mobs surrounded the refugees in the areas of Negombo and Periyamulla, and demanded that they leave.

With nowhere to go, the refugee groups found temporary shelter at various locations — including the open car park of the Negombo Police station. It was from here that the Negombo Police rounded them up and packed them into several buses that transported them to a temporary community centre.

Sri Lanka is not a signatory to the United Nations 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, or its 1967 Protocol. Refugees arriving in the country are only allowed temporarily stay until their applications for asylum elsewhere are processed. They are not legally allowed to work in Sri Lanka, forcing them to rely on an allowance from refugee agencies and handouts from local churches and charities to survive. Given the recent upheaval in the country, some 1,060 asylum seekers, including women and children, are currently seeking temporary shelter at local mosques, police stations and community centres for fear of possible reprisals and threats, the UNHCR reports.

Some of these refugees were relocated by the UNHCR to a rehabilitation centre in Vavuniya. “Around 35 families were transported in May. It will be much safer for them [there],” Ahamed told Roar Media. He said some, assisted by the international Ahmadiyya community, had even left the country and found asylum elsewhere. “But many still remain at the community centre with nowhere to go,” he said. “The process to relocate them is long and dragged out. And most of them want to return to the homes they left behind in Negombo.”

Sister Noel Christine Fernando, living in Seeduwa, has worked closely with refugees and other disadvantaged communities throughout her life. She fears that exiled refugee communities will not be allowed to return to Negombo.

“On the day of the attack, I was able to go to Negombo and help families and others at the hospital. I was in Negombo until the funerals concluded and everyone went home. I was there when the refugees were transported and when that happens a group of nuns and I—who work on charity— helped them with provisions. But now the situation has changed completely,” she said.

She ascribes the change to a fundamental shift in attitudes after the attacks.

“We can build churches but if we fail to understand and love each other, then there is a problem. That is the question mark that is hovering above Negombo right now,” she said.

Cover image courtesy: The Associated Press

A Special Parliamentary Select Committee was appointed recently to inquire into the Easter Sunday terror attacks. The inaugural meeting of the Committee saw some startling revelations being made.

The Hate Speech Monitor is the latest civil society initiative that was launched to combat online inflammatory messages and fake news.

Fifteen-year-old Ajmal stands with a dazed look, his eyes red from crying. He is surrounded by a group of men who are angry. Their raised voices are filled with grief as they cry out: “He was innocent and he was killed. Were we attacked because we called out the extremists among us? Is that the punishment we deserve?”

Still a child among adults, Ajmal stands at a distance, not seeming to comprehend any of the clamour around him. He knows that his 49-year-old father, M. S. Fouzal Ameen, was killed, and that he drew his last breath in front of their home, while Ajmal and the rest of the family were inside waiting for him.

The nightmare began on the evening of Monday, May 13, when Ameen and his family were at home, waiting to end their daily fast. It was around 6.20 p.m. when a mob, estimated to be about 300 strong, their faces covered and carrying heavy cudgels and swords, stormed Kottaramulla in Nattandiya, where around 1,500 Muslim families have lived peacefully alongside Sinhala and Tamil families.

The mobs had already attacked the neighbouring town of Thummodara, destroying two mosques and burning and looting Muslim-owned homes and shops.

Ameen was killed in Kottaramulla that day, the only reported casualty of riots that targeted Muslim communities in the Western and North Western Province, three weeks after the Easter Sunday attacks.

Ajmal recalled the events of that day.“When we heard that there were mobs outside, my Appa told us to stay inside and not to leave the house. We were inside when we heard a loud bang. Appa went out at that moment and returned quickly; he said that there were men outside and that they were attacking the house in front of ours. The loud noise had been them breaking into that house through the front door.”

Having set the neighbours’ house ablaze, the raging mob arrived at Ameen’s home. They hit the front gate with their bludgeons to break it open before proceeding to destroy Ameen’s lorry. They had broken its windows, poured turpentine on it and set it on fire. All of this happened while Ameen and his family cowered in fear inside.

“The people were shouting. There was a lot of noise. Appa left us to see what they were doing. He told us again, ‘Don’t leave the house. Lock the door after me’. He didn’t return so we decided to come out when he became silent for a while. Amma cried out when she opened the door and ran outside. I stepped out and saw Appa lying on the ground. Fazmy ayya was also there. The police were there but they didn’t do anything. They were looking at my Appa,” he said. At that point, Ajmal’s voice quivered and he began to weep.

The family’s friend and neighbour Fazmy (24) was the first to see Ameen’s brutalised body left behind by the marauding mobs. “The house next door was burning. The front door and the windows had splintered apart. I went around the back and I saw Ameen on the ground. They had poured turpentine on his face. The back of his head was bludgeoned and his face was slashed,” he said, drawing a finger across his own ear, temple and lip, showing where Ameen was wounded.

Fazmy said four police officers arrived at the scene following the attack, while the mob was still roaming the area. “The police officers shot at the sky and the crowds dispersed. They didn’t even help us take Ameen to the hospital. If they had helped, Ameen would not have died,” he said.

Ameen’s relatives describe him as a peaceful person. He has been called a generous businessman, who helped many in times of financial need. His relatives said Ameen would give out loans to anyone who asked, regardless of who they were.

For Ameen’s younger brother, Mohammed Najim Ibrahim (47), grief came out as fury. “This was a terrorist attack and no one can say otherwise. They were heartless and ruthless in their acts. If this is what’s going to happen, we will have to respond too,” he said, angrily.

“Our religion doesn’t preach hate. But in our grief and anger, we don’t know what we would do. We feel as if the rest of the society has trapped us inside a room and are attacking us like we are some mongrels. It has to stop before we bite back,” he said.

Ameen left behind his wife and four children, the youngest only six years old. Their future is uncertain and bleak. The family left their home after burying its sole breadwinner on Tuesday, May 14, leaving behind the furniture shop that Ameen ran. Ajmal’s mother is now in mourning, and according to relatives, will not leave the house for three months. Ajmal—pale and dismayed—has been spending his time giving statements to the media and police, and meeting politicians who make home visits. In just one evening, he has been unceremoniously—and unwillingly—propelled from adolescence to adulthood.

The current situation in the country, in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka, has created a hotbed for fake news, misinformation and disinformation. Here's how YOU can spot fake news before you share it.

White flags of mourning are strung up over small lanes in the Katuwapitiya town in Negombo. Like the silk strands of a spider’s web, the lines are drawn to the centre, where the church of St. Sebastian still stands, despite being the site of the most horrific of the terror attacks on Easter Sunday, killing over 100 worshippers.

A church of the Catholic majority of Katuwapitiya, believers congregate to St. Sebastian's for the miraculous healing powers of its patron saint. St Sebastian, who has the power to avert pestilence and contagious diseases, is also known for granting a holy death.

“My son was at the church at that time and now he’s with God. He died at the church and he is now in heaven,” said Callistus Perera (63), who lost his 11-year-old son in the Easter Sunday attack. Like him, many of those left behind, now believe that dying at the church of their patron saint has granted their loved ones the holiest of deaths.

Chamod Sivan Perera was the only child of Callistus Perera, who, with his wife, were well into their fifties when their son came along, brightening up their lives. But Chamod was only 10 when his mother passed away to cancer, and having devoted all his time to caring for ailing wife, Callistus is now unemployed, doing odd jobs every now and then, just so that they can survive.

“Earlier this month, putha received a pair of new shoes. It was a gift from one of our relatives. He wanted to wear it for the Good Friday service, but I told him to keep it for another occasion. So he decided to wear it for the Easter service. He wanted to show it off to his friends, “ Callistus reminisced from within the pain.

In Katuwapitiya town, the Sunday Easter service is preceded by a small procession of villagers who gather together and walk to the church singing hymns. The congregation arrives at the church at 8.00 AM, when the church bells ring and the service commences. On that day, Chamod went to church with his aunt, because his father was not feeling well.

“That morning, he wore his Sunday best. A blue shirt with white polka dots and his new shoes. Putha tapped on the shoes and asked me, ‘Do I look good?’ and I told him that he did. Then he left to the church. That was how I recognised him,” a broken Callistus said. “His shoes. I saw his shoes. After the explosion, when I was searching for him, someone called and said putha was there. I saw his shoes. That’s how I recognised him. It was the first time he wore those shoes.”

Like any child his age, Chamod was an active boy. He loved sports and according to Callistus, excelled at cricket, hockey and volleyball. He was an average student but a religious child and even served as an altar boy, occasionally assisting in Sunday services.

Today, the burden of the memories weigh Callistus down; with every recollection, the pain of his loss and the realisation of how alone he is in the world permeates deep into his soul.

Negombo is the home to many Roman Catholics, but other ethnoreligious communities have coexisted peacefully there too. And while it is clear the Catholic community were the targets, it was not only Catholics who fell victim to the Easter Sunday bombings.

Fathima Asla (14)’s father is Muslim, and a well-respected businessman in the area. Her mother is Roman Catholic. Wracked with grief, Fathima’s father was not willing to talk to us— he pointed instead at his nephew, asking him to speak to us instead. Farzan Ahmed, Asla’s cousin, recalled how, together with her two sisters, she had accompanied the mother and her materal grandmother to the church service that day.

“The grandmother– the maternal grandmother, and the three sisters were at the church. Asla went because most of her school friends were there as well. And normally, when something like this happens, the entire village gets together. The grandmother sustained injuries from the attack. But Fathima did not survive,” her cousin Ahmed told us.

Inside the house, Fathima lay on a bed of white cloth. Garbed in equally virginal white, the quiet repose on her face—pale and slim with a thin prominent nose—made her look as if she were in a deep sleep. It was an unusually quiet funeral home, with everyone grieving alone. Only her mother would occasionally break the silence–her sobs, made reverberating in the room.

On the first day after the attack, Kumar Churchill (53) came to the church with a bouquet of white carnations. He tied it on the closed church gate, and there, he wept.

“After the explosion, I heard people cursing and wishing others unwell. But that is not the way. This is God’s wish. We are all brothers. This community has lived together for so long,” Churchhill grieved. “We were all part of the parish. My wife and I were married in this church that is now destroyed. We recently celebrated the 150th Church Feast. We spent millions on it. Maybe God didn’t like that very much either,” he said brokenly.

A week after the attack, the town of Katuwapitiya is still in mourning. The mass burials took place two days after, presided over by the Archbishop Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith Perera, who has called for adherents to keep the faith, even in these trying times.

Father Daya, a priest attached to a nearby school that both Chamod and Fathima attended, arrived at the St Sebastian's Church, a mere fifteen minutes after the explosion went off. “When you walked through the main doorway [of the church] you would [witness] a massacre,” he said. “I have visited this church so many times but have not seen the church in such a gruesome state. It was red, a deep red all over.”

While Father Daya, busy ministering to the families struggling with the loss of a loved one, seemed calm and collected, his description of the carnage from the Easter Sunday bombings, was chilling. Piles and piles of bodies, perforated church walls. Blood mixed with dust, the dust from the clay shingles that fell after the explosion, are seared in his memory.

“I lost my best friend in the attack,” he said. “He attended the service with his wife—they were married at this church 11 years ago. He died on the spot. They were together when the explosion occurred, but it was my friend who sustained severe injuries, to which he succumbed. His wife survived. I was at the hospital helping the families until 1.00 AM, so my face may not express any sadness, but I—.” Here, his voice broke and the look in his eyes completed what he wanted to say.

I am greeted with suspicious looks and doubtful glances. They see my overgrown beard and the big backpack I’m carrying and view me with clear apprehension in their eyes. I smile but they do not return it. Then, one woman sees me, gasps and cries out: “How dare you come out like that near our homes? When bombs are going off everywhere! Don’t you know we are all afraid? Can’t you hear us crying? There has been enough violence here. Please leave!”

Her voice attracts curious faces to the narrow road adjacent to the now destroyed St Anthony’s Church in Kochchikade, Colombo 13. After apologising and explaining my purpose, the residents, many of whom have lost their families and friends, calmed down. Their fear was palpable. As soon as it rose up, it bubbled down, only to be replaced by a devastating grief. Tears welled up in the woman’s eyes. She said, “I’m sorry, putha. We are all very sad these days.”

It was 8.45 am. The hands of the clock are stuck. The impact of the explosion on Easter Sunday (April 21) threw the cogs and wheels of the clock off their usual course, and now they are frozen in time.

Every morning, many of the residents in the area still come out to the yellow crime scene tape that has been drawn by the Police, marking the security perimeter around the St Anthony’s Church. It’s almost as if by instinct. Recovering from the shock has been difficult for many. Besides, it was a shared experience—and continues to be.

“We were near the Mother Mary statue inside the church when we heard an immense sound — it sounded like a firecracker but louder and scarier,” 60-year-old Mary Janet told me. She sells candles outside the church every Tuesday.

Candle sellers are synonymous with St. Anthony’s Church. You can see them near the entrance, holding out candles to church goers.

Since it was Easter, and since her family couldn’t attend the Saturday night mass, Mary Janet and her clan —including grandmothers, daughters and grandchildren—had participated in the service that morning.

“One of our daughters gave birth and we brought the newborn along with the other children so that they could be blessed by the priests. We were going around the church, kissing the statues and saying prayers. We escaped the blast. Everyone I know survived because of the grace of our God. That’s what we have told our children. But so many others lost their lives. It was our holy day and we spent the night in tears. We had no one to tell our grief except God.”

Father Joey, who was delivering the service on that morning, had recalled to authorities that he had seen a bright red ball flying across the church towards the altar, after the explosion. The ball had fallen somewhere close to the church organ, he had said. For the life of him, he could not fathom what it was.

While retelling this story afterwards, Brother Herman said a group of other priests had searched near the church organ afterwards. They discovered that what Father Joey had seen was a dismembered human head.

“I had just finished breakfast and was about to prepare the Holy Communion. I heard a large sound as if a generator had exploded. I stepped out to see the entire inside premises of the church covered in dust and smoke. Father Joey was walking down towards the entrance of the church; dazed and in shock. We had to escort him out with all the others. My church was a bloodbath,” he said.

To many of the denizens of Kochchikade, the church is the heart and soul of the town. Everything revolves around it. That powerful connection with the church and its patron saint, surpasses all religious divisions. . Despite their ethnicity—and Kochchikade is a multicultural hub where you find kovils, mosques, temples and churches in close proximity—the community believes that the saint watches over them.

“Even during the 1983 riots, when my [Tamil] people were being burned alive and murdered all over the country, no one dared lay a finger to this community,” Jaya Kumar (64) said. “Nothing happened in Kochchikade during the pogrom. And we believe that it was because of the saint.”

Kumar is a Hindu. He is now retired and serves as the caretaker of a small kovil down the road, which his mother used to oversee. He showed us his altar, where Ganesh and Krishna share space with a statue of St. Anthony and framed pictures of the Virgin Mary.

Kumar said, “Maybe it was because we are such a close-knit community that the perpetrators wanted to bomb our church. Otherwise there was no reason to attack the one place that kept this place safe and peaceful for all these years. We thought things like this would be over with the war.”

For others, the loss felt personal even when it wasn’t.

“I personally did not lose anyone. But everyone that we lost were from the village, so it hurts as much as a family death,” F. Fernando (43) told us while tying black and white flags of mourning. These flags were strung up above the roads and bypaths leading to and away from the church.

Even before the dust has settled, there are palpable fears about communal tensions.

The Kochchikade Jumma Mosque was damaged in the second explosion that took place on Monday, April 21. Law enforcement detected the bomb and evacuated the public in order to conduct a controlled explosion. However, many of the nearby buildings sustained minor damages such as broken windows. Naufer, who was praying at the mosque said, “We trust the people in the village. But we are afraid to go out wearing the cap. We are not sure as to what would happen.”

For those who survived the blast, it is clear that life as they know it has changed irreversibly.

Delicia Fernando and her husband, Anthony Santiago Fernando, went to church that morning with the entire family. Delicia and their children—two daughters and a son—were at the front of the church while Anthony was at the entrance, where the statues of various saints are kept.

Anthony Santiago Fernando, named after the patron saint of the church himself, was found lying unconscious on the floor by his son after the explosion. Delicia and her son carried him out together when the ambulance arrived. He was taken to hospital but they weren’t allowed to come with. Later that day, they heard from the hospital that he had been pronounced dead on arrival.

“I think he was close to the explosion,” Delicia told us. “But he didn’t have any major wounds. We were not sure how he had died until the post mortem told us that a metal piece had struck his heart and it had stopped working.”

Her eyes welling up but with a smile on her face, she recalled:

“Anthony had a good heart. He never had much money with him. When he got paid, he would come home and give his salary to me. If you approached him and said you were hungry, he was the kind of person to buy you food and stay hungry the entire day. Now, he’s gone and I fear for the future of our children.”

Cover image: Gathering near St. Anthony’s Shrine in Colombo on Easter Sunday after the explosion.  
Photo credits: Mohd Rasfan/ Agence France-Presse

A series of devastating bomb explosions occurred on Easter Sunday morning (April 21) targeting multiple churches around the country and three luxury hotel complexes in Colombo. Two days after the attacks, here is a timeline of the events so far.

00.00 am: Sri Lanka declares state of emergency from today following the deadly attacks. President Sirisena issues the extraordinary Gazette declaring the emergency.

04.00 am: State-wide police curfew has been lifted, Police Spokesperson announces.

05.00 am: Reports of a supposed video by the Islamic State claiming responsibility for the attack surface. The video claims that the attack was carried out by its members.

08.30 am: Three minutes of silence observed in memory of the victims of the Easter Sunday terror attack.

09.00 am: Police announce the death toll from Sunday’s attack has risen to 310.

The funeral services of those who died in the St Sebastian Church bombing are carried out in a public burial ground in Katuvapitiya. The procedure is preceded by a large and sombre Catholic service with many of the local residents participating.

09.30 am: Police Spokesperson notes that 40 persons have been arrested so far over the attacks; 26 of them are currently being questioned by the CID and three are being held by the TID.

11.00 am: Sri Lankan police have held a Syrian national in custody for questioning over attacks: Reuters

2.00 pm: Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe addresses Parliament. He says the group was trained and the attack was planned, and involved great secrecy. Says security forces committed to apprehending those involved/linked. Emergency Regulations to empower security forces to apprehend and detain suspects.

3.00 pm: Police Headquarters advises all police stations in Colombo to be on high alert about a lorry and a van suspected to be carrying explosives.

Initial investigation reveals that Islamist extremist group National Thowfeeth Jamath carried out the attack in response to NZ Christchurch attack. This group also has close links with another organization called JMI, State Minister for Defence Ruwan Wijewardene tells Parliament.

In Parliament, Opposition Leader Mahinda Rajapaksa says a government that cannot ensure the safety of its citizens is of no use. "When I handed over the government, it was free of terrorism. No such attack would have happened on our watch," he says.

3.20 pm: Police Spokesperson notes that two men have been arrested for spreading false information on water contamination around the country and remanded till May 06.

4.00 pm: Islamic State claims responsibility for Sri Lanka bombings through its Amaq news agency: Reuters

5.00 pm: Police curfew to be imposed from 9 PM tonight to 4 AM tomorrow: Police

6.00 pm: At a press conference, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe says there seems to have been foreign involvement in the attack. “Some have travelled abroad and returned. It’s why we have asked for international assistance.” He says some, but not all, attackers have been identified.

He adds that an inquiry has been launched to why the prior information on the attack did not reach his office. “If we had known we could have prevented or reduced number of attacks,” he says.

Postmaster General says sealed packages will no longer be accepted. Packages will need to be sealed in the presence of officers.

8.45 pm: President Sirisena says he hopes to restructure the leadership of the security forces during the next 24 hours.

6.00 am: Police Spokesperson announces that the statewide curfew imposed on Sunday (April 21) has been lifted.

9.45 am: Justice Ministry requests all coroners to carry out post-mortem examinations on persons killed in terror attacks to facilitate the release of bodies.

11.30 am: Government Analyst’s Department confirms that the attacks on the three churches and three hotels were carried out by suicide bombers.

12.00 pm: Several May Day rallies organised by political parties are cancelled.

12.15 pm: President Maithripala Sirisena appoints a three-member committee with Supreme Court Justice Vijith Malalgoda, former IGP N. K. Illangakoon and former Law and Order Ministry Secretary Padmasiri Jayamanne to investigate the attacks.

1.00 pm: Government Information Department announces that as per Presidential decree, police curfew is to be imposed from 8.00 pm on Monday until 4.00 am on Tuesday, April 23.

Police Spokesperson debunks rumours that poison has been mixed into water supplies in several areas of the country.

1.15 pm: All night mail trains scheduled for Monday night are cancelled, according to the Railway Control Room.

1.30 pm: Defence Secretary Hemasiri Fernando, speaking to journalists gathered outside the St Anthony’s Church in Kochchikade, says that the Defence Ministry had received information about a potential attack but did not expect it to be of this magnitude. He emphasised that the reports suggested that the attacks would come from a small but well- coordinated and funded group that would carry out independent attacks, targeting high profile political members. He justified the Ministry’s actions, adding that the information was not enough to take proactive measures prior to the Easter Sunday attack.

1.45 pm: Gold News reports that three people have been arrested for idling near Mahawila Gardens, Dematagoda where the last explosion occurred on Monday.

2.00 pm: Government declares Tuesday as a National Day of Mourning.

Death toll stands at 290, including foreigners. Over 500 injured.

2.20 pm: President’s Media Division (PMD) announces that a conditional state of emergency has been declared after a National Security Council meeting headed by the President.

The President has also decided that articles on combating terrorism will be gazetted and come into effect at midnight. The legislature will give powers to security forces to ensure public safety, PMD highlighted.

During a media conference, Cabinet Spokesperson Rajitha Senaratne and several Government officials accuse the group known as National Thowheed Jamath for the attacks. Senaratne noted that the intelligence report had been distributed to certain prominent members of Parliament. According to him, the accused organisation is said to have international support.

2.45 pm: Police Spokesperson reports that the Police has discovered 87 detonators at the private bus stand in Bastian Mawatha, Pettah.

3.30 pm: Nine suspects arrested for their involvement in the attack at the Shangri- La Hotel, Colombo remanded till May 6 by the Colombo Magistrate’s Court.

3.45 pm: Police note that the three officers who were killed on Sunday have been promoted posthumously.

4.00 pm: Officers of the Special Task Force and Sri Lanka Air Force bomb disposal unit defuse a suspected parcel withholding a bomb, in a controlled detonation inside a van near the St. Anthony’s Church in Kochchikade. Police evacuate the public nearby before the detonation.

5.00 pm: President Sirisena tweets that authorities have been ordered to do what is necessary to root out the terror connections behind this attack.

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Police search a house behind a church in Enderamulla in Wattala. They subsequently arrested two suspects from the house for questioning.

Reports come in of a suspicious vehicle at the Nawaloka Grounds, Welisara; Police commence search operation.

Negombo- Colombo road temporarily closed; Police arrest two individuals for probable suspicion.

5.30 pm: Pope Francis tweets about the situation in Sri Lanka.

Today, too, let us join in prayer with the Christian community of Sri Lanka, which was struck by terrible violence on Easter Sunday. We entrust to the risen Lord the victims, the wounded and all the suffering. #PrayForSriLanka

5.40 pm: Colombo Magistrate’s Court allows Colombo Crimes Division to detain and interrogate a youth who filmed the explosion in Dematagoda.

6.15 pm: All Catholic private schools will reopen for the second term on April 29.

6.30 pm: INTERPOL announces that it will deploy a team to Sri Lanka to support investigations.

8.00 am- 8.45 am: Six explosions occurred simultaneously across Sri Lanka, three of which targeted Catholic and Christian churches and three luxury hotels in Colombo. Explosions are reported in the Shangri-La, Kingsbury and the Cinnamon Grand Hotels.

Explosions are said to have occurred during Easter Sunday service at the churches.

9.00 am: Reports of the attacks on the St Anthony’s Church in Kochchikade in Colombo 13, St. Sebastian’s Church, Katana and Zion Evangelical Church, Batticaloa, are confirmed by Sri Lanka Police. Number of injured are not confirmed; injured from all six locations rushed to nearby hospitals.

Among the injured are a large number of churchgoers and several foreigners.

10.00 am: Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith Fernando condemned the attack. The Cardinal requested the public to remain calm and advised not to “take [the] law into their hands”. He urged the public to help the victims and also donate blood if possible.

11.00 am: President Maithripala Sirisena expressed shock and dismay at the attack. He noted that the Police and tri-forces have already commenced investigations and urged the public to stay calm and refrain from spreading misinformation.

Department of Government Information issued a public notice expressing condolences to those affected by the attack. The Department urged the public to not to get swayed by gossip.

British High Commission in Colombo issued an updated travel advisory to those travelling to Sri Lanka.

#Sri Lanka: There have been a number of explosions in Sri Lanka, including Colombo, on Sunday 21 April. Please follow the instructions of local security officials and follow travel advice for updates. https://t.co/vWOodfYNtg pic.twitter.com/U3nmVKJmCx

11.30am: Emergency Security Council meeting took place with the Prime Minister and Secretary of Defence. A special Cabinet meeting is to follow.

11.50am: Education Ministry issued a notice closing all schools in the island on Monday, April 22 and Tuesday, April 23.

Passengers are requested to be at the Bandaranaike International Airport four hours prior to their flights. Visitors have been restricted from entering the airport until further notice.

12.20 pm: Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe condemned the attack. He highlighted that the government is taking immediate steps to contain the situation.

12.40 pm: Director General of Health Services of the Ministry of Health, Dr. Anil Jasinghe, noted that the death toll has increased to 138, including nine foreign nationals. Nearly 300 have been injured, including 13 foreigners; 45 in Colombo; 67 in St Sebastian’s Church in Negombo; 25 at Zion church in Batticaloa, in the east.

Archbishop’s House cancelled all Easter sermons across the country that were scheduled for the evening.

12.45 pm: Minister Harsha de Silva tweeted photos of an emergency meeting between Prime Minister, Cabinet ministers and senior military personnel.

PM @RW\_UNP met w ministers n senior military personnel; all measures taken to maintain peace. Security tightened. Please stay calm. Please act responsibly. Please NO politics. We must all act together as #SriLanka citizens. My condolences to all families who lost loved ones. pic.twitter.com/j6e3qEPgNt

12.55 pm: Opposition Leader and former President Mahinda Rajapaksa condemned the attack.

It is absolutely barbaric to see such violent attacks on such a holy day. Whoever is behind these attacks must be dealt with immediately. My thoughts and prayers are with the families that lost loved ones and all of Sri Lanka.

1.00 pm: Karu Jayasuriya, Speaker of Parliament issued a statement condemning the attack.

Multiple cowardly attacks this morning were not against any religion or ethnic group, but the whole Sri Lankan nation, bound together by friendship and brotherhood. In this difficult time, let us stand stronger to wipe out these heinous forces from our country, whoever they are. pic.twitter.com/n31N5GVTbG

1.15 pm: Police noted that death toll has increased to 156, including 35 foreigners.

1.30 pm: Death toll rose to 185; 46 dead and 469 injured at the Colombo General Hospital; 17 injured in Colombo South; 74 dead and 113 injured in Negombo hospital; 31 at the Katana General; 7 dead and 30 injured at the Ragama General; 27 dead and 80 injured at Batticaloa General; unconfirmed number of injured children admitted to the Lady Ridgeway Hospital, Colombo

1.35 pm: Hemasiri Fernando, Secretary of Defence, addressed a media briefing acknowledged the attack. Condemning the incident, Fernando urged the public to refrain from spreading misinformation. He noted that the authorities are on top of the incident.

1.40 pm: Speaker’s Office announced that Parliament will be convened on Tuesday (23rd April) in order to discuss the emergency situation.

2.00 pm: Social media and online messaging platforms, including Facebook and Whatsapp, stopped functioning; a reported geo-block in effect.

2.10pm: Explosion reported at a small hotel lodge opposite the Zoological Gardens in Dehiwala. Two individuals reportedly dead; zoo temporarily closed.

2.30pm: Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe visits the St Anthony’s Church in Kochchikade. Prime Minister claimed stern action against those behind the attacks.

2.35pm: Islandwide curfew to be declared from 6.00 pm on Sunday, April 21 to 6.00 am on Monday, April 22, as per the instructions of the President to the Inspector General of Police.

State Defence Minister Ruwan Wijewardene noted that the government will pay for the funeral proceedings. Noted that foreigners in affected hotels have been moved to different accommodation. Security tightened across the country. Wijewardene noted that the situation is under control; authorities will take every possible action to prevent further attacks and to arrest all perpetrators.

2.40pm: Eighth explosion reported in Dematagoda, Colombo 09. Explosion reportedly took place at a house; fire reported as well. Three people admitted to Colombo General Hospital.

2.45pm: Social media and online messaging platforms such as Facecbook, Whatsapp and Viber blocked in order to prevent further dissemination of false information.

3.15 pm: Suspicious parcel found in Jampettah Street also known as K. B. Christy Mawatha. Police has deployed Bomb Disposal Unit of the Special Task Forces for inspection.

3.19 pm: Inspector General of Police imposes immediate curfew island wide, ahead of schedule. Curfew will be in effect until further notice.

3.20 pm: Another explosion is said to have occurred at the same house in Dematagoda as the previous explosion.

3.30 pm: Four individuals arrested by the Police after an intense firefight in Dematagoda, following the explosions. The suspects were arrested in the same housing complex where the explosion occurred.

Three police officers killed in the Dematagoda explosion.

3.45 pm: Police Spokesperson claimed that a special operation launched around Kotahena and Dematagoda areas. Reporters on the ground claim Sri Lanka Police are utilising drones for surveillance activities around the residential areas.

4.10 pm: Pope Francis, head of the Catholic Church condemns the attack, during the Easter Sunday homily, at St. Peter’s Square in the Vatican City. “I wish to express my heartfelt closeness to the Christian community [of Sri Lanka], wounded as it was gathered in prayer, and to all the victims of such cruel violence. I entrust to the Lord all those who have tragically perished,” he said, “and I pray for the injured and all those who suffer as a result of this tragic event”

4.20 pm: Leave for all police and military officers cancelled.

All night mail trains scheduled tonight also cancelled.

University Grants Commission announced that all government universities are shut down and exams postponed.

4.45 pm: State Minister Ruwan Wijegunawardene said that seven suspects have been arrested in connection with today’s coordinated attacks in Colombo, Negombo and Batticaloa. Government confirmed that most of the blasts were suicide bomb attacks, organised and carried out by one group.

4.50 pm: Minister Harsha de Silva tweeted during a media conference that at least 160 casualties were reported, including approximately 30 foreigners.

@RWijewardene says 7 people under arrest for morning attacks that killed at least 160 people including perhaps close to 30 foreigners (Source: Sec/Foreign Affairs) at meeting now w heads of media. Asks for responsible reporting. pic.twitter.com/kKrwdr0uJt

5.00 pm: State Minister Wijewardene noted that the three police officers—one Special Investigator and two police constables—who were killed in an explosion, died while pursuing the suspects in Dematagoda.

Defence Secretary Hemasiri Fernando noted that the Government is not considering declaring a state of emergency yet. A decision on this will be made after a meeting with President Maithripala Sirisena tomorrow morning.

5.20 pm: Police Spokesperson SP Ruwan Gunasekara, addressing the media, noted that the explosions in Dematagoda occurred when the Police arrived at the location, based on a tip-off.

Three police officers were killed in the incident and another was injured.

At the moment, there are 207 known casualties according to the Police Spokesperson with approximately 450 injured. These include 66 dead and 260 injured at the Colombo National; 104 dead and 100 injured at the Negombo General; 2 dead and 6 injured at the Colombo South; 28 dead and 51 injured at the Batticaloa General and 7 dead and 37 injured at the Ragama General Hospital.

5.45 pm: Addressing the media, Military Spokesperson Brigadier Sumith Atapattu highlighted that over 1000 military personnel from the tri-forces have been deployed to Colombo alone for investigation and security purposes.

5.50 pm: Foreign Secretary Ravinatha Aryasinha has said that 27 foreigners were among the casualties. At least five still reported missing. Heads of foreign missions kept informed about the foreign casualties. Foreign Ministry will not release the nationalities of the casualties right now.

7.00 pm: Police confirm that a van suspected to have transported explosives to Colombo has been apprehended and its driver arrested in Wellawatte.

7.10 pm: Colombo National Hospital reports that 35 foreigners have been killed in the incident. Among the victims are nationals of the United States, Denmark, China, Japan, Pakistan, Morocco, India and Bangladesh.

8.30 pm: Bodies of a woman and two children recovered from under the debris of the house in Dematagoda, where several explosions took place.

8.50 pm: Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe addressed the nation on live television. He claimed that there had been intelligence reports warning of a potential terror attack, which the law enforcement authorities failed to investigate prior to today’s event. "We must look into why adequate precautions were not taken. Neither I nor the Ministers were kept informed."

9.30 pm: Police confirm they have found a house in Panadura allegedly used by the suspects.

9.40 pm: President has appointed a special investigation board headed by a Supreme Court judge, to inquire into the attacks. The board has been asked to submit a report within two weeks.

10.00 pm: Number of arrested suspects up to 13. Of these, 10 have been handed over to the CID for further investigations, according to the Police Spokesperson.

22.30 pm: The Eiffel Tower in Paris, France turns off all lights in memory of the lives lost in today’s attack while Real Madrid FC held a minute of silence before kick off.

23.15 pm: An improvised explosive device (IED) found in Katunayake within close vicinity of the Bandaranaike International Airport; Sri Lanka Air Force Spokesperson Group Captain Gihan Seneviratne noted that the bomb was successfully diffused.

Cover Image Credit: Getty Images

We always pine to travel among the stars. The closest we can get to know the cosmos beyond the Earth's atmosphere is through a planetarium. This is the story of Sri Lanka's largest mobile planetarium built by one person.

Her breath is slow and shallow, in and out. Her arms—fingers locked in an intricate gesture—are resting on her knees, with her legs crossed. She is meditating, focused on inhalation and exhalation. There’s a sword in front of her: its curved, black blade is slightly rusted, giving it a blood- soaked look.

She opens her eyes, ever so slowly.

She’s ready.

Despite its magnetic appeal, angampora, අංගම්පොර, has a missing link.

Its history is hazy, and is saturated with B-rate origin stories that try to market a myth. No one has been able to wrestle down the true origin of this martial art, which traces its roots to prehistoric war clans that inhabited Sri Lanka. Some research has suggested that it is over 5,000 years old and that it was practised by two main schools during the medieval period of Sri Lanka’s history.

On the other hand, historic texts claim that the art was practised by kings and princes, taught to them by village elders. Subsequently, British colonialists banned it because they thought it was being used for guerilla warfare.

The history is sketchy mainly due to the fact that the practice served as a familial bond for those who practised it. It was a legacy that was handed down from one generation to the other. Through word of mouth, and secrets that were closely guarded, the martial art has survived for more than two centuries.

On October 6, 1818, angampora was banned by English Governor Robert Brownrigg, following the Uwa Wellassa uprising. It was only last February, however, that the government took restorative steps and issued a gazette notification lifting the ban.

The decision came in the wake of a request made by the chief instructor of the angam unit of the Sri Lankan Airforce, Noel Ajantha Perera, to the Minister of Housing Development and Cultural Affairs, Sajith Premadasa. Subsequently, the Minister submitted a proposal to preserve and promote the practice of angampora and related forms and practices, which was approved by the Cabinet of Ministers on March 12 this year.

The proposal included steps to revoke the colonial ban on the practice of angampora and to declare it a national heritage. It further highlighted the need to allocate provisions to preserve and promote the martial art through events on a national level.

According to the Cultural Affairs Department, there have been several attempts to streamline angampora and bring it back into the public sphere. During the tenure of former Ministers of Cultural Affairs, T B Ekanayake and S B Nawinna, resources and finances were allocated to establish an angampora development centre in Mahawa in the North Central Province.

However, this plan never came to fruition.

With the current political interest in the practice, the Ministry officials are optimistic about its future, despite the lack of a master plan to ensure its continuation.

However, expert practitioners, masters and gurus maintain that the country is yet to tap into the greater possibilities of angampora.

Guru Piumal Edirisinghe, founder of the Sri Lankan Traditional Indigenous Martial Art Association (STIMA), is sceptical of the government initiative.

“There’s doubt among many of those who practice martial arts as a profession as to whether angampora can be taken seriously now,” he said. “Many of them have lost faith in the form because of the number of fraudulent practitioners that have saturated the market. Angampora is now seen as a joke and as entertainment by many of those who do sports.”

According to Edirisinghe, who is also the secretary of the National Angampora Federation, there are two possible avenues to develop what is possibly the world’s most secretive forms of martial arts.

“Angampora has to be developed in the country as a national sport,” he said. “We have examples from other countries we can follow. Kerala’s traditional martial art, kalaripayattu, which is very similar to angampora, has been developed and adopted into the modern context, sponsored by its government. Or take Muay Thai. Muay Thai is the sports version of the deadly classical art form called Muay Boran. Now it is a sporting event practised worldwide.”

According to Edirisinghe, angampora has the same potential. “It’s just that we do not have a common platform and national syllabus that is working with the intention of developing the martial arts into a more open and approachable sport,” he said.

Despite the lack of a concerted government plan, Edirisinghe believes that there are ways in which it can be revitalised.

“ The best way to do it is to make angampora a tourist attraction,” said Edirisinghe.

“Cultural activities such as the practise of angampora have a wide potential among tourists.” Whether or not this will save angampora is up for debate.

Cover credits: angampora.com

For a person walking the narrow paths of Wanathamulla, the concrete alleyways amidst the high-rise condominiums, the last thing you would expect to find are murals.

The dull drab walls of Sahaspura, housing families in its 430 small apartments, that run up 12 storeys has a common courtyard that has been turned into a garbage dump.

One wall donnes a traditional red and orange yaksha mask with piercing deadly eyes. Alongside it is a half painted sketch of a woman’s face overlaid with a clock. A sketch of Ravana in all his godly regalia is drawn on another wall. Nearby, someone has crudely written කුනු (garbage) on the side.

No one ever goes there to collect the garbage. Scraps and whatnot are thrown out of the condominium windows that fall straight down 12 storeys, it is dangerous enough to maim a person. These walls that have forgotten at least a semblance of fresh paint are decorated in curious murals.

We asked a couple of men, smoking a beedi nearby whether they knew the artist who painted these murals. “Probably some කුඩුකාරයා (drug user),” they responded and told us to go away.

Sri Lanka has a vibrant art culture. We have a historic tendency to draw on walls, that go back to the earliest cave paintings to the Sigiriya murals. However, murals and street art remains a dying subculture even in the arts hub of the nation. Yes, we have the one off competition organised by a high profile restaurant chain to paint the walls in a bid to attract a potential market. Other than that it is hard to find artists, who are dedicated to make art for the sake of making art.

The public perception of making murals is considered a nuisance mostly due to the unwanted graffiti that decorate every other wall with the names of schools and disturbed lovers to the toilet cacography. Many of the residents in Dematagoda and Wanathamulla, did not know who was behind the murals that were found all over the place. Most of them, disregarded them, despite its uniqueness and the obvious story they were telling.

A dirty staircase, covered in betel juice spit stains held Bugs Bunny passing a rolled up cigarette to Mickey Mouse, drawing attention to the ever present narcotics trade, these areas are notorious for. There is never a signature, never an artist identification, claiming ownership of the work.

Why would anyone do this?

According to Prageeth Ratnayake, artist, exhibitor and the art director at the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation, a mural is the physical manifestation of an idea that cannot be sold, it does not have a price tag or an owner, once the artist has completed it, once the wet paint dries on the wall, it becomes a public property.

“As an artist I sell my work. People come and buy them and hang it on their homes as decoration. But when I draw on a random wall of a random street, that cannot have any capital equity. Your piece can be worth millions but at the end of the day, you are satisfied with giving back to the society,” he noted.

Ratnayake, during his career as a professional artist that spans at least 20 years, did his first mural last February. His piece decorated the road to Bakeriye Kattiya Space in Pannipitiya, which held the Down Town Pulse—a cultural celebration of the new arts.

Ratnayake’s mural took less than two weeks; the selected wall—with permission from the owners—was whitewashed with two coats of paint. His wife and children, together with him, painted the collage of squares, depicting a miniscule portraits, words, a map of Sri Lanka and even a barcode.

“I had the idea in my head. I knew what I wanted the final outcome to look like. This is engagement. My work engages with the society. It takes the discourse out of the heart of Colombo and into the heart of the suburban locales. Once it was done, the nearby residents had a lot of questions. They were intrigued as to what they were; they slowed down when walking past it and I knew people were wondering and trying to interpret it. I didn’t offer any answers and to be honest, the meaning of the mural can be whatever they want. The public engagement that I witnessed after the paint dried down and settled, that feeling of satisfaction cannot be put to words.”

Firi Rahman, Parilojithan Ramanathan and Vicky Shahjahan are the most unusual trio you would find in the tapering tunnels of Wekanda and Kompannavidiya, Colombo. They are artists– their lifestyles intertwined with the community they have known since birth; their home and heart, they would say.

For their crusade, murals and street art are a modus operandi through which they are trying to outlast a community that has been degraded and demeaned. Kompannavidiya is known as Slave Island, given its historic context. It has been called a mudukkuwa — a slum, filled with criminals, drug dealers and danger all around.

The We Are From Here project, spearheaded by Rahman, is an art project to portray that the community is not bound by the stereotypes set by society. The idea is to curate, in a sense, a disappearing community in the face of rapid urban restructuring while portraying a dimension that is not visited, unrecognised, undiscussed and unacknowledged.

“Our intention is to celebrate our neighbourhood. We want to talk about the good things that happen in it and the best way to talk about it is through the people in the community. We want to take the attention away from the negative perceptions with regards to our neighbourhood is viewed through. So since 2015, we have started collecting stories for the project to curate our history in the form of anecdotes and identities,” Rahman said.

For the project, Rahman drew pastel coloured portraits of several individuals from their neighbourhood. One could be seen near a random manioc vendor, another next to a makeshift garage, another alongside a black and white mural of a camera staring back at you.

The locations mattered. The primarily orange, yellow and blue mural next to the vendor told the vendor’s story; he would meet you with a bright smile that resonated through his eyes, tell you his story and if he liked you, he would give you a kadala packet to go. The other of an individual known as ‘Captain’–mechanic, resident of the torn down Java Lane and overall expert in classic motorcycle. The one next to the camera mural was of the artist herself—Rahman drew Shahjahan without her knowledge. Once completed and seen, she said it was the greatest gift one could have given her.

At the moment, there are ten portraits strewn across the many walls of Kompannavidiya. According to Rahman, they have no intention of stopping at ten.

To Shahjahan, the project is all about meeting new people and getting to know them. As an androgynous artist, who went through many a challenges put forward by her own community when she was coming out, she claims to have first hand experience in the stigma that surrounds Slave Island.

“We want to break that stigma. We are getting to know people we didn’t even know lived here. People here have achieved so many things. We have a champion martial artist. We have people who sell food at Galle Face. We have artists like Firi [Rahman] and so many other people, with so much talent. They deserve recognition, they deserve to be identified.”

Cover image: Kaputu Art by Janith Weerasinghe, painted in Pannipitiya. Photo credits: Akila Jayawardana

There was a time when Indian bottom trawlers violating international law and encroaching Sri Lankan waters made regular headlines. In response, the Sri Lankan Navy arrested Indian fishermen on a weekly basis, and confiscated their bottom trawlers. There were also regular updates from Tamil Nadu’s late Chief Minister Jayalalithaa, who brought up the issue of ‘historic waters’ surrounding the Kachchativu island. The argument was that despite internationally recognised maritime borders, the waters surrounding the island ‘historically’ belonged to Tamil Nadu, which gave those fishermen the right to fish in it.

Yet, over the years, things have changed. The furore over fishing has relatively died down.

Since last year, the Ministry of Fisheries has conducted a series of programmes islandwide to inform the public of recent developments concerning the conflict. The idea was to change the perception—both local and international—of events unfolding in local waters, and to underline the act of Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing carried out by bottom trawling foreign vessels in local waters.

At the same time, the number of arrests made of defaulting fishermen has steadily dwindled. Activists and lobbyists, armed with revamped legislation, are now arguing that more pressure from the government is necessary. They contend that there is decreasing attention towards illegal fishing by Tamil Nadu fishermen, which has not stopped despite proactive measures.

The issue of IUU fishing was first highlighted back in 2013, a few years after the end of the civil war. Local fishermen received the long-awaited opportunity to fish in Northern waters during the post-war years. This provided them the opportunity to rebuild their livelihoods, which were devastated by strife. But what welcomed them were monstrous bottom trawlers that stood like giants in comparison to the small-scale fishing boats of the North.

Prior to two specific political incidents—the change in the Sri Lankan Government in 2015 and the death of the firebrand Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa in 2016—Sri Lanka carried out ad hoc arrests of encroaching fishermen.

The Navy’s proactive approach of arresting and confiscating Tamil Nadu trawlers for IUU fishing in Sri Lankan waters between 2013 and 2015, resulted in the highest number of arrests in 2014. This, in turn, led to correctional facilities becoming overcrowded with fisherfolk from Tamil Nadu.

However, since 2016, the numbers have reduced. The Sri Lanka Navy, which continues to make arrests, has said that arrests are carried out whenever encroaching trawlers are observed during routine perimeter checks.

In addition, the Government has released a number of fishermen in a bid to reduce the burden on overcrowded prisons in the Northern and Eastern provinces. However, fishermen were also released because they were not charged under the ‘correct law’.

According to Attorney-at-Law Chinthaka Fernando, legal representative of the Fisheries Cooperative of the Northern Province, incarcerated fishermen have been released because they were charged with entering the country illegally, under the Immigration and Emigration Act of Sri Lanka.

Fernando noted that the government’s case is weakened by using the wrong legislation. “Inmates who were charged under the Immigration and Emigration Act have no case that could be heard in courts,” he said. “They have been charged under the wrong legislation. That’s why they are released and repatriated back to India, after languishing in local jails. Subsequently, however, they all come back. When asked why the inmates were charged under the wrong law, Fernando iterated, “We don’t know, especially since the proper legislation was readily available.”

Fernando iterated that the provisions of the amendments made to the Fisheries Act, which came into effect in 2018, is currently being utilised to take action against recently arrested fishermen.

According to Fernando, the Government pushed to enforce amendments to the current legislation when its loopholes became apparent, back in 2016. In 2018, the Fisheries (Regulation of Foreign Fishing Boats) Act No 59 of 1979 was reintroduced with amendments.

These included a change in jurisdiction, from High Courts to Magistrate Courts. The amendment that came into effect last July also enforced increased penalties on offenders. According to Fernando, 15 vessels have been arrested and their crew members prosecuted under the Act since its enactment.

Fisheries activist Thiyagaraj Waradas noted that regular arrests by the Sri Lanka Navy and prosecution by the Department of Fisheries under the amended Act, has the potential to deter Tamil Nadu boat owners from fishing illegally in Sri Lankan waters.

Apart from this, lobbyists have called for the decommissioning of bottom trawlers that are taken into custody, by either sinking or destroying them once legal procedures have been completed.

The call from activists comes in the wake of Sri Lankan authorities consistently releasing confiscated trawlers. The last batch of six boats were released on 1 February, 2019. Between 2018 and January this year, the Navy has released 34 trawlers to their owners. According to Waradas, this has drawn condemnation from Northern fishermen. Marine biologist and fisheries activist, Dr. Steve Creech, said, “Detained vessels should only be released if and when the fine imposed by the Courts, under the Act, is paid by the boat owners.”

Sujeewa Fernando (45) was a career fisherman, until he was diagnosed with Chronic Kidney Disease of unknown etiology (CKDu) and had to give up on his work. He is now the President of the Puttalam Fisheries Union, which collaborates with other fishing communities in the country. He also manages vessels operated by his sons. According to Fernando, despite the change of governments and the implementation of more proactive laws, not enough work has been done to alleviate the issues faced by local fishermen.

Contradicting the Sri Lanka Navy, Fernando noted that arrests are made only when a complaint is lodged with the authorities.

“There is no point in telling the Police — they are powerless. The sole authority we can complain to about Tamil Nadu fishermen is the Sri Lanka Navy. But our people and the unions receive the shortest end of the stick when it comes to getting their attention. If 50 vessels encroach our waters, a maximum of 10 would be arrested by the Navy within a month’s time,” he said.

Satellite images taken between 2012 and 2014 showed that approximately 2,500 trawlers crossed the international maritime borders between India and Sri Lanka at night. Every Monday, Wednesday and Saturday, these mechanised bottom trawlers, which are the size of a bus, encroached local waters with steel nets that dug up the sea bed in one fell swoop.

After a series of back and forth discussions between stakeholders, the Sri Lankan government initiated ad hoc arrests. These measures invited criticism from Tamil Nadu, which cried foul and accused the Sri Lankan Navy of arbitrary arrests.

Studies have shown that Sri Lanka lost an average direct income of. six billion rupees per year due to IUU. The seafood industry lost revenue as well, which compounded the economic loss incurred as a whole.

After the issue gained nationwide attention, the Government banned bottom trawling in 2017. However, recent reports have suggested that the illegal practice might see a resurgence soon, with the Government deliberating on amending the law to legalise local trawling.

While the adhoc arrests continue at a snail's pace, and political attention from Tamil Nadu has somewhat diminished, the plight of disadvantaged fishermen has not changed.

“Every time the foreign fishermen encroach, their boats destroy our nets and equipment,” said Fernando. “There’s no compensation for that. We lodge a complaint, and after ages, arrests are made, only for them to be released again. They won’t stop coming and we are at a complete loss here.”

According to him, IUU fishing only compounds the problems that fishermen already face. “The fishery industry is riddled with many other issues ranging from corruption to poverty, none of which are highlighted by politicians,” he said. “We are struggling to stay alive and the foreign fishermen are but one of our problems.”

Cover image courtesy: newindianexpress.com

Education Ministry, in a bid to develop schools, has decided to closed down over 1,000 schools islandwide.

This is a hard story to tell. It was harder to share, she said, let alone retell it.

When Senuri\*, 27, found herself pregnant, only a few weeks after marriage, she was furious. From being the carefree girl she once was, Senuri recalls how she became a completely different person. At a time when she was supposed to be elated, she recalled an irksome individual, provoked at the slightest change.

She was pregnant with a honeymoon baby at the age of 26, marooned from what she felt was her freedom and youth, and chained to an immense responsibility. Her anger skyrocketed; she remembered taking it out on her husband for the slightest incident. Things didn’t change even after she gave birth.

After she had her firstborn, she felt a devastating sense of hopelessness.

Even though it was expected of her to be enamoured by the new being she had brought into the world, her own life felt devoid of all reason. Her job lost meaning, her relationships failed to bring her joy and the newborn baby felt like nothing but a burden to bear. Senuri found herself easily provoked, unable to sleep properly, always wanting to isolate herself from her family and friends, and refusing to see the baby. It was clear that she was depressed.

“I hated it when my husband would pay attention to the baby,” she said.

Senuri’s memories, as she recalled to me, were vivid: the disgust that surged when she saw the baby, giving way to bile rising up in her throat. Twice, she attempted suicide. Twice, she failed.

Postnatal depression (PND), also known as postpartum depression, is a feeling of extreme sadness, hopelessness and anxiety, which might interfere with a person’s ability to care for herself or her family, specifically following childbirth. It is classified as a major depressive disorder.

According to psychologist and lecturer Hansini Gunasekara, PND is a common problem. It affects approximately one in every ten women within a year of giving birth. It can also affect fathers and partners. Of those who develop PND, 25 to 50% experience depressive symptoms lasting more than six months.

In Sri Lanka, the prevalence is around 15%, she noted. “Many of the cases, however, go undiagnosed. Therefore, it is difficult to grasp the real prevalence of the problem. There are approximately 380,000 births every year in the country, meaning that 57,000 of those mothers [might] experience PND.”

One of the first Sri Lankan prevalence studies on PND conducted among antenatal and postnatal mothers in Puttalam District indicated a prevalence of 32.1%. A larger study conducted in 166 clusters in 18 districts showed a prevalence of 27.1%, indicating the need for urgent attention towards this acute mental condition in Sri Lanka.

Statistics show that despite a developing country, Sri Lanka’s maternal healthcare is on par with that of developed countries. While medical care for mothers is widely regarded as an essential service in Sri Lanka and given due prominence, both socially and in terms of policy, there are some grey areas that have been ignored. The diagnosis and treatment of PND is one such issue.

According to Gunasekara, mental health was introduced as a component of the family health programme under the Family Health Bureau’s maternal and newborn health care policy. Despite this, there is a serious lack of human resources in the healthcare system, especially when it comes to mental health.

Gunasekara says midwives play a crucial role in monitoring the mental health of new mothers. “Midwives are the closest medical officers to patients in certain parts of the country. They build up close relationships with mothers and mothers-to-be. Midwives and maternal healthcare workers now talk about mental health of mothers and babies as part of their prenatal curriculum,” she said.

But there are significant hurdles, such as the availability of trained mental health professionals. Even though psychologists, psychiatrists and counselors can be found in most parts of the country, their numbers are still very low compared to population sizes. “First of all, the number of psychiatrists and psychologists who could make a correct diagnosis is rather low in the country,” said Gunasekara. “For every 100,000 people, we have six doctors, 14 nurses and 1.6 midwives. This rate is somewhat low compared to other countries in the region.”

For example, India has 4.7 midwives per 100,000 people and Nepal has 2.4 midwives. Interestingly enough, given Sri Lanka’s low birth rate, statistically, the available number of midwives are sufficient to maintain the maternal healthcare system.

Let’s return to Senuri’s story. After giving birth and snowballing deeper into her depressive episode, her parents began to notice her behaviour. She said that her mother was quick to bring her situation to the attention of several medical practitioners. The psychiatrist they first consulted claimed that counselling and therapy would not help her depression.

Senuri was subjected to an assortment of medications, antidepressants and electroconvulsive therapy. She was treated as an outpatient at the psychiatry ward of the Teaching Hospital, Peradeniya. She was administered electric shocks, and then sent home to face her many anxieties.

“It didn’t make much difference to what I was feeling,” she said. “And the environment I was in didn’t help it either. After treatment, I always returned to my husband’s home which was different from what I grew up with. I came from a rather conservative family, which gave prominence to discipline and obeying one's parents. But my husband’s family was the complete opposite of what I had experienced. They were loud and vibrant. They argued a lot, they laughed a lot and it was hard for me to empathise. I still loved them but it was difficult for me, to become part of that environment. Even the smallest thing would provoke my anger and I would fall through the same hole once again.”

Subsequently, she stopped psychiatric treatment and opted for therapy. She visited a counsellor for weekly sessions, sometimes alone and sometimes with her mother or husband. Her husband received therapy as well.

Gunasekara noted that both medication and therapy are viable treatment methods for PND. Her advice: “Don’t struggle on alone and hope the problem will go away. It can continue for months or years if nothing is done. Furthermore, fathers and partners can also become depressed after the birth of a baby.”

Paternal Postpartum Depression (PPD) in fathers may manifest in a different way. For example, fathers may abuse substances, or withdraw from their spouses. They may have sudden bursts of anger and display behaviour that deviates from their usual behavior. Paternal PPD also has negative impacts on the family, including increasing the likelihood of emotional and behavioural problems among their children and conflicts in the marital relationship.

Changes in hormones such as testosterone, estrogen, cortisol, vasopressin, and prolactin during the postpartum period in fathers may be biological risk factors in paternal PPD. Fathers who are exposed to ecological risk factors, such as excessive stress from becoming a parent, lack of social supports for parenting, and feeling excluded from mother-infant bonding, may also be more likely to develop paternal PPD. Support from their partner, educational programmes, policies for paid parental leave, as well as the optional consideration of psychiatric care may help fathers cope during the postpartum period.

On top of all this, there is also the taboo that surrounds serious psychological issues. Senuri was advised by her husband not to tell anyone about what she was going through. There is a similar silence when it comes to PPD islandwide.

Depression itself is generally a taboo topic. When depression is associated with parenthood, it becomes even more out of bounds.

“The reality of having a baby,” Gunasekara explained, “is that it is a stressful event that can bring forth major changes in life. The only way to address this is by building awareness. The only way to do that is through more research and studies. The numbers available at the moment are rather small and not helpful. We simply have no idea about the true statistics. Lack of awareness means people don’t come to hospitals for treatment.”

Feeling sad at a time when society expects you to be happy is devastating. According to Senuri, no matter how many medications she took to alleviate that feeling, they bore no results. But with time, she has realised that moving ahead is a walk — one that involves taking small steps forward instead of big strides.

\*name changed to protect identity

Cover image credits: Jamie Alphonsus/ Erin McPhee

While heading towards Giriulla on the B322 in the Northwestern Province, you come across the rather sleepy town of Nalla. Falling between Giriulla and Kotadeniyawa, Nalla is remote and out of the way, with just a few kades (kiosks) scattered every few kilometres. Aside from the soupçon of families that have lived here for generations, others arrive at this halfway town in search of greener pastures. At the halfway point of this halfway town is a petrol station like no other.

This is Sri Lanka’s first all-female fuel filling station — the ‘Lanka Filling Station’ in Nalla, where the staff, from the manager to fuel pump attendants, are all women.

Given that it is considered a grubby job, Sri Lankan fuel attendants are almost universally men. But this town is challenging the norms.

On any day at the Nalla Lanka Filling Station, there are four women working the pumps. These are their stories.

Surangika Malkanthi, at 28, is the youngest attendant at the station. But she isn’t the newest recruit, having worked at the shed for about a year-and-a-half. From nearby Giriulla, she said the filling station had piqued her interest when it opened in 2014. Meek and retiring, Surangika looked to her husband before answering our questions.

“I wanted to join when it first started. It seemed interesting because they were hiring women too and I had not seen that happening before. I couldn’t because my children were young,” she explained. “Two years ago, I approached the manager and told her that I’m interested in working and was hired on the spot.”

Her husband, Akila, 28, also works at the filling station — but at night. The management won’t allow women to take the night shifts. In Sri Lanka, women are prohibited from working at night for a variety of reasons, primarily with physical safety in mind. Under the Employment of Women and Young Persons Act, employing a woman after 10 p.m. requires special permission from the Commissioner of Labour, and is only pursued in exceptional circumstances.

We asked Surangika about the most memorable incident she had experienced while working at the pumping station. She laughed out loud, and looked to her husband, Akila. He laughed and obliged with a funny story: “On the first day itself, she pumped diesel into a vehicle that runs on petrol,” he said.

I was nervous, even though I’d had a bit of training. I was anxious when the customer approached me and—without thinking twice—I took the diesel nozzle and started filling the tank. It was a petrol car. I had to cry out for him [Akila] to come and drain it out. After that, I used a petrol pump. I will never forget that as long as I’m here — they won’t let me forget it!”

When 39-year-old Sunitha Malkanthi (not related to Surangika Malkanthi) started working at the Lanka Filling Station in Nalla, she didn’t at first tell her parents or her children what she was doing. But after she started bringing home money, she was compelled to tell them.

While she declined to share with us what their exact response to her choice of employment was, she told us that she had been determined to continue working. Malkanthi’s hair is neat, jet-black, and tied into a tight plait. A brilliant white smile masks her austere demeanour. She spends most of the day away from the other attendants in solitude.

Malkanthi and her husband who are originally from Melsiripura (between Kurunegala and Dambulla), now live in Nalla, in a rented house that is within walking distance from the filling station. This makes it easier for Malkanthi to walk to and from work.

Many of the women in the Nalla area are employed in the textile and garment sector, having to work long hours for meagre salaries. Their options are limited, and are often confined to entering this gruelling industry, or staying home while their husbands continue to be the primary breadwinners. The lack of viable options often force women to stay at home. In 2017, 6.5% of the country’s female labour force—approximately 203,155 individuals—were unemployed, compared to the 2.9% men who were unemployed the same year.

My husband is off doing his own work. But in this economy, a family cannot survive when only one person is working. That’s why I’m working too. I’ve worked in Kuwait and at a garment factory. But this is the most enjoyable job I’ve had — by far.”

Forty-year-old Niluka Deepani is not even from Nalla. Originally from Piliyandala, she came across the all-female filling station while visiting relatives in the area, and was immediately intrigued. Deepani is sprightly and talkative — her quips and quirks dominate the shed. “Hey, there’s a car coming machang,” she yelled at Surangika mid-interview.

I was down on my luck after my business failed. I didn’t have a proper income and I was living alone. Working here has given me so much and I’m truly grateful. Women, despite their talents and capabilities, have never been given the opportunity to work — the world has always been about men. But now, with the work we have done and are doing, we’re proving that ladies can do anything.”

Ratna Gamage is easily the most senior employee at the station. At 64, she’s short and plump, and has an assortment of medical issues, including diabetes and high blood pressure. You would not notice any of her ailments with her fast-paced speech and tendency to fly into monologues. She told us that she had never dreamt of finding work anywhere, at her age. Enthusiastic beyond her years, Gamage found out about the filling station through a newspaper advertisement and was interested in the vacancy that, bypassing norms, called for women recruits.

Gamage lives behind the shed, in a shared space with Deepani. The two are closer to each other than they are to the other attendants. With Deepani’s sense of humour and Gamage’s cheer, the 92 Octane pump is rarely devoid of laughter.

I have no family except for my sister — everyone else has passed away. I used to live with them before, but now I live here at the station. Now that I’m working here, I don’t get sick that often. I still take my medicine. But I think that if I were somewhere else, not working, I’d be worse off — keeping busy helps take my mind off being sick. Now my sister says that since I’ve started working, they can’t get me to stay over with her.”

According to Rashmi Pathiraja, the owner of the station, she was inspired to try this unique concept after a visit to China. “There was always the question of whether women would join us,” she said. “But that was quickly solved when women lined up for employment.” She is proud of the fact that her initiative gave women in Nalla a chance to earn an income and learn to do something new.

But her decision did not come without criticism. “Society, as always, had its compliments as well as criticism,” she said. “You know how they always point out the wrongs, including even the right decisions. [But] we just wanted to do our job. We had our priorities.”

The filling station has become something of a cynosure of eyes; people often stop here to see for themselves the women who run the station. But Pathiraja is wary of the attention. It was only with great reluctance that she agreed to speak to Roar Media. “After we received so much exposure from the media, it came to the point that the police had to warn us of possible break-ins,” she said. “So we are now trying to reduce the attention on us.”

Cover Image Credit: Nazly Ahmed / Jamie Alphonsus / Roar Media

Everyone hates a late train.

An over-crowded train station that prolongs your commute is a living nightmare. More often than not, this is the reality of the Sri Lankan railway system: trains routinely run late, they are congested and commuters block the doorways.

Amidst this commotion, a group has come together to introduce a semblance of order to the railway system.

The Government Railway Passengers community is a group of railway commuters who have come together to share information about the daily schedules and other occurrences in the railway system. The group, which utilises social media to crowdsource information, predominantly operates on two active online platforms: the official Facebook group and the mobile application (available on Google Play Store and App Store).

The group’s English name, RDMNS, is formed from the initials of the Sinhala name — රජයේ දුම්රිය මගින්ගේ නිල සමූහය. The RDMNS community has now swelled to include over 75,000 daily commuters. These members swap daily updates on local railway services, train delays, derailments and even bizarre acts of human kindness.

The community was founded by five core members, but it now has as many as 25 administrators and information coordinators. We met two of the founding members, Viraj Harshana and Imal Meemaduma, who told us how the community came into being.

Here’s how it works:

The administrators work together to trawl through the information submitted by members who use the four main railway lines, and the additional lines spread across the country. The information is provided through chat groups which are active 24x7, after which the administrators verify each report. These are then passed on to the core administrators who upload each report to the group and the mobile app.

According to Harshana and Meemaduma, the office crowd—who are avid users of social media— make up most of the chat groups that provide the initial reports.

“There are 250 individuals in the four chat groups, based on Facebook Messenger, for each (railway) line,” said Harshana. “The groups receive well over 1,000 reports per day, while the mobile app receives over 50-60 inquiries every day.” Apart from the usual reports, administrators also receive over 100 emails with additional information that is used in the verification process from those who are not part of the chat groups.

The community will celebrate its second anniversary this December, while the mobile app will turn a year old at the same time. Within this short time period, the community has become an exemplar of a crowdsourced information hub, dedicated to public service.

"The power of people who come together in these moments is magnificent,” said Meemaduma. “The app has huge potential and we would like to expand operations if not for the lack of funding. Right now, everything is being carried out through personal funds. Whatever we receive from advertising is utilised to organise CSR projects focusing on developing the railway system and upgrading public utilities in the country."

Dubbed fondly as the ‘railway fans’, the founders are solely dependent on the community itself for marketing. “Word of mouth is the only marketing strategy that has been utilised for the app,” they noted with a laugh. “Since this is a crowdsourced endeavour, the community depend on its members to spread the news to other commuters.”

According to Harshana and Meemaduma, the mobile app was developed by a volunteer and is now managed by a group of four volunteer developers. The app developers were found through one of their chat groups, following an open call for volunteer developers.

The community hopes to add new features to the application.

The new features will include tracking lost and found items and property on trains; an offline timetable is also in the works. With the latest update, which is scheduled for the near future, the app will introduce a method of tracking a train utilising GPS technology, and sharing its location in order to approximate arrival times. In addition, it will also feature useful contacts such as station contact numbers and railway security contact details in case of emergencies.

A train tracked via the app arrives at the train station in real time. Video credit: RDMNS

The mobile app has also proved its worth during protests and ongoing strike actions such as the series of trade union strike action seen last year. Commuters were provided alternative routes to reach stations when there were protests in Colombo. They were also informed of active trains handled by retired railway employees (which is the mechanism used to address the lack of trains during strike action), during trade union strikes.

"During the last strike that hit the island, the app almost crashed due to the sheer number of traffic received," Harshana said.

Despite the immense commercial possibilities presented by the app’s runaway popularity, Meemaduma and Harshana are not keen to cash in. "We just want to show the power of crowd sourced information and movement utilised as a public service, it's a free service for the benefit of the public itself. It can certainly go a long way with proper funding, but right now, our interests lie with doing this service, not earning a profit."

Sri Lanka has had its fair share of natural disasters as a result of climate change. If things do not change—as predicted by experts—we can expect more devastating catastrophes. However, with the most recent reports of global warming and climate change around the world, Sri Lanka, as an island, has to take a proactive stance to mitigate and face natural calamities.

Financing measures against climate change can be a daunting task for a developing country focused on overcoming an economic crisis. In order to overcome the challenges imposed by climate change, governments around the world are forced to take enterprising steps to avoid disaster in the long run. More often than not, these measures are expensive; new infrastructure is needed, capacity building is a must and new talent and knowledge is essential.

Climate financing is when developed economies partially fund or invest in sustainable development projects in emerging economies, to encourage carbon neutrality.

As a developing nation with an emerging economy, finding funds and essential resources against climate change is a daunting task. The Sri Lankan Government’s focus is primarily centered around development. As such, it is in the agenda to mitigate the impact of climate change through large scale development projects.

Funds allocated for disaster management is comparatively different from climate financing.

Spokesperson of the Disaster Management Centre (DMC), Pradeep Kodippili told Roar Media that the Sri Lankan Government has allocated unlimited funds to institutions such as itself, when challenged with a disaster situation.

“This is a priority of the government and is essential in disaster management. The DMC and the Department of Meteorology are provided [with] unlimited funds at request, in order to mitigate the impact of a disaster[ous] situation. Other than that we have fixed funds for training and prevention measures allocated for a fiscal year.”

Sri Lanka was recently declared as a country at high risk of experiencing the effects of climate change and extreme weather events, by the Germanwatch Global Climate Risk Index 2019.

The warning was issued to Sri Lanka for its vulnerability to climate change such as intensive rainfall, prolonged drought, flash floods, landslides and rising of sea levels. The declaration was made following 2017’s series of natural disasters that struck the country which resulted in the loss of 246 lives and displaced over 600,000. Through these events the country is estimated to have lost a staggering USD 3.1 billion.

This is the first time Sri Lanka topped the index.

According to the, CEO of Janathakshan GTE Ltd., Ranga Pallawala, an institution focused on capacity building such as training and awareness programmes with regards to climate change, Sri Lanka’s economy cannot sustain climate financing on its own. But to him, the country, shouldn’t invest in it independently either.

“Developed countries have an obligation to provide developing countries—such as Sri Lanka—assistance in the challenges imposed by climate change. It was the increased industrial activities of these countries; emission of greenhouse gases and the increased carbon output has paved the way to the current predicament, where global warming has reached extraordinary levels. Island nations which are most at risk from climate change due to the rising sea levels, require the financial commitment of other nations,” he noted.

The idea became a major topic of interest in Sri Lanka only a decade or so ago and is a relatively new field of studies derived from development work itself. It takes place in a variety of ways; grants, funds and loans provided through international institutions.

According to Pallawala, there are several international institutions such as the Green Climate Fund (GCF) that provide assistance to take low carbon emission pathways and to build resilience for extreme weather events.

Annually, Sri Lanka obtains approximately USD 2–10 million for development projects from these institutions, Pallawala noted.

GCF’s recent most investment was to subsidize USD 52 million to strengthen smallholder farmers in the dry zone to climate change and extreme events through an inclusive approach to water management. Similarly, the Government has allocated the funding to major development projects that have vested interests in combating climate change, such as the Moragahakanda- Kalu Ganga Development Project which was built for water management in the dry zone.

However, financing alone cannot stop this crusade. The public mindset has to change as well. In order to do that enabling new legislature is the best way to go.

Director of the Climate Change Secretariat of Sri Lanka Dr. Sunimal Jayathunga, told Roar Media that the proposed Climate Change Act is currently being drafted. Once compiled it will be submitted to Cabinet and then, Parliament for approval and implementation.

According to him all attempts are being made to pass the Climate Change Act within this year.

The main agenda behind the proposed Act is to implement a regulatory arm that would act as the middleman between the Government and the energy sectors of the country, when it comes to taking the necessary action to reduce Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions.

Sri Lanka has pledged to minimise climatic change through the power and energy sector and guaranteed the country will reduce GHG emissions by 20 percent by 2030 — out of which the government can only afford four percent, while the remaining amount will be fulfilled through the external support.

Furthermore, the country has agreed to reduce GHG emissions by 10 percent from the transport, industry and waste and forestry sectors. Similarly, the government is only capable of meeting three percent of this parameter and has highlighted the need of external support.

According to Dr. Jayathunga, it is imperative to establish this authority with a cemented set of guidelines and regulations.

“In the 2015 Paris Agreement, we made promises internationally. But, heads of Ministries and Departments (such as the Ministry of Mahaweli Development and Environment, Department of Disaster Management and Meteorology), are not concerned about this at all. At the same time, when Government changes, state officials do not show any interest either. People and government tend to forget the promises they have to keep. Therefore, it is essential to bring this to the legal framework,” he noted.

Pallawala chimed a similar tune. According to him, Sri Lanka can reach more ambitious goals with realistic work plans, provided we receive the support, both international and national.

“There is a need to enhance knowledge in climate financing. At the moment, the country’s climate financing experience is limited. We are doing it, but more needs to be done with regards to building capacity and expanding our knowledge. It cannot remain separate and alien. It has to be integrated into development projects so that it has a direct relationship with the country’s socio-economic backdrop. And the people have to be more aware of what’s happening in the environment around them,” he emphasised.

Cover image courtesy of Thiva Arunagirinathan/ Roar Media

Down the road, around the corner with a petti kadei where people always flock for a tea and a wadei, is a rectangular building. Its two storeys—maroon and off-white—are unwashed and dirty. But once inside, you are in for a treat; there are rows and rows of books and publications—from translated novels to children's books to reference literature. This is the Kotahena Public Library.

It’s ground floor is a lending library, housing hundreds of books while the first is a large study hall, where the public is allowed to study and read the newspapers. Library members can also browse the internet, making use of the single computer the library has for multimedia purposes.

It is one among the many public libraries in the Western Province that is run by a small group of individuals. Kotahena Public Library, acting as a branch of the larger Colombo Public Library, under the Colombo Municipal Council has three permanent employees—one chief librarian, one senior librarian and one library assistant. Three people are definitely not enough to run a library in the middle of a city.

This is not the only library suffering from a shortage of qualified employees, lack of funding and the misperceptions of governing bodies. Due to these matters, libraries around the country—save for few—are maintained manually in a digital age.

These are, in fact, a set of issues and challenges faced by public libraries around the country. The situation is overarchingly bleak at a glance. However, there are some survivors.

According to the National Library and Document Services Board (NLDSB), Sri Lanka has approximately 1,500 public libraries. All public libraries are governed by the respective local governments, urban and municipal councils. Apart from the public libraries, the country also has specialised department libraries, private libraries and school libraries.

The country’s public libraries are small scale and are run on insufficient funds without proper resources. Except for a few, many of the libraries, the NLDSB noted are ‘floating’ with the only updates coming in the form of daily newspapers, gazette notifications and other government publications, whereas other documentation such as research papers, academic books and literature of all sorts go amiss.

There are of course several public libraries such as Colombo Public Library that have surpassed these obstacles and have managed to serve the community impressively..

Colombo Public Library's Deputy Chief Librarian Chintha Ailapperuma told Roar Media that the funding from the governing authorities depend on the council's perception and attitude on libraries. "The funding for most of the libraries depend on the attitude the chairman and higher ranking council members have of libraries. Funding is allocated annually, accordingly. There was a time when the situation was rather bleak; with libraries closing down due to lack of funding. However, the situation has turned around and there has been progress. People are showing interest in libraries again," she noted.

It was only a few months ago that a proposal was submitted to the Sri Jayawardenepura Kotte Municipal Council to do away with the public library in the Rajagiriya. During the 2019 budget reading of the Kotte Municipal Council it was noted that the library was translocated from a prime commercial area to another, resulting in a drop in membership. Even though further funding was proposed during the budget for the upcoming year, concerns were raised against this, claiming that the money will be 'ill-used' on a library that ‘no one visits’.

Yet, the library services system in the country is optimistic. "There is a great development in public interest within the Western Province," Ailapperuma said, "According to an ongoing survey we [Colombo Public Library and the NLSDB] are conducting, most libraries in the province are at a commendable position, meaning that they receive the necessary funding to stay active and are duly updated when it comes to publications, digitalisation and other systems."

Senior Librarian Colvin Fernando noted that despite a number of available vacancies, the Kotahena Public Library is manned by the three employees on two shifts. “It’s hard work to do, but we are managing. We are trying to make do and develop what we have.”

The Colombo Public Library, together with its branches all around Colombo, has had around 110 vacancies since 2013 that have not been fulfilled. For this year, 49 more vacancies were announced. Recruitment has been temporarily halted due to the lack of qualified potential employees in the local job market.

According to the NLDSB, a qualified librarian is an individual who has completed his or her studies in library science. Such recruits can face further government exams to advance forward in a library career. However, individuals with even the basic qualifications are hard to come by and more often than not vacancies in smaller libraries are filled through political affiliations in smaller scale libraries. The best example is the Kotahena Public Library, which as mentioned before, is run by a group of three.

Digitisation Of Libraries

Libraries are rendered redundant in the digital age. However, digital transformation has not completely eradicated the concept of libraries but has upgraded it. Many of the libraries around the country, according to Ailapperuma have digitised their systems, abandoning the library card system which meant that the libraries dependent on a manual system of stacking, cataloguing and keeping track of documents and books.

The digitised system, obviously more efficient and work-friendly, depends on a barcode system. Each book has a specific barcode which is tracked using a library system software. And each library card has been transformed into an online profile maintained within this system. Some library systems track borrowed books, availability of academic papers and other documents, monthly subscribed magazines and other publications via open source software developed for the purpose. Libraries now provide internet services as well,not to mention free wifi to anyone who enters the building. In addition facilities include a digital library, where they maintain copies of most of the publications and documents available for perusal in the library.

According to Ailapperuma, not all libraries have gone digital. While the Colombo Public Library and a handful of libraries including the public libraries in Jaffna and Kandy provide these services, most other rural libraries are unable to go digital due to the lack of funding.

Even branch libraries as the one in Kotahena have trouble going digital. It is yet to introduce a digital library to its members and it was only in 2017 they successfully automated the library system. Their one computer that is allocated for public usage is of the old generation with an ethernet internet connection. “It’s barely used,” Fernando noted. “And the first floor of the building, where the multimedia section is placed, doesn’t have proper ventilation. So it gets really warm during noon.”

Yet the situation is not bleak as obtaining funds from their local governments. Institutions such as the Information and Communication Technology Agency and the Open University—which has developed Koha, the library database software, utilised by a majority of libraries across the island—are in the works of providing the necessary infrastructure that is essential for digitisation of libraries.

Unlike the Colombo Public Library which boasts a membership count of 175,000 since the inception of the library, with 25,000 active members, the Kotahena Public Library has only 2,500 members. The membership fee, for all public libraries, remain the same. Authorities are yet to realise that there is potential in attracting more members for disadvantaged libraries through at least miniscule change in the membership fee. The income can go towards the development of the library, eventually making all libraries self sustainable, instead of having to depend on their respective local governments.

“Almost all of these members are active with their membership,” Fernando commented. “They borrow books. Students refer to the library and study from morning till the library closes in the evening. Around 700 children’s accounts are maintained and they show up daily after school. We always try to have a monthly event to increase popularity and pique public interest.”

The Colombo Public library gets 20-30 new members daily. According to Ailapperuma, public interest in the library will never diminish any time soon. "Even though there's insufficient funding, lack of proper employees and other issues, libraries will never cease to exist in the country. Individuals who have used a library, at least set foot into one, know the value of a library and the service it does."

Law was only taught as a part of higher education in Sri Lanka. But now, students can learn the basics of Sri Lanka's legal system and legislature while still in school.

The Slave Island area of Colombo, also known as Kompannavidiya, has a rich history that dates back to 1505. Best known for its multicultural makeup and the distinct architectural style of its old buildings, Slave Island has always had a distinct identity. This ethos is being slowly replaced by a newer, more modern character.

At present, several development projects are underway in the area, under the Government’s USD 287 million Colombo Regeneration Project. These projects include a housing relocation project for old-time residents and the refurbishment of the Slave Island railway station.

Most of the buildings in Slave Island share common features such as sweeping arches, and intricate woodwork interwoven with metal embellishments. The best examples of this Victorian style of architecture include the railway station and the De Soysa building.

Built in the late 1870s by the famed philanthropist, Charles Henry de Soysa, De Soysa building is one of the heritage structures in the epicentre of the city that has been marked for demolition.

The De Soysa building is largely run down. The paint is peeling, the hollow walls have become a haven for mice, the roof leaks and the stairs creak. Even though it is dwarfed by the vertiginous constructions in the area—and has certainly seen better days—it still survives.

Its compartmentalised spaces—originally intended to function as a two-storeyed block for shophouses, with shops on the ground floor and residential spaces on the first floor—have managed to house generations of families, who have lived here their whole lives. A number of small businesses, shops and homes built decades ago within the unrefurbished walls of the De Soysa building, continue to flourish to this day.

One of the building’s longest occupants is also perhaps its least known: Sri Lanka’s oldest surviving billiards club. Located in one of the narrow cubby hole spaces of the De Soysa building, it is over 76 years old.

When Abdul Rahim, a self-taught billiards and snooker player, started the Colombo Central Club in 1946, it held the distinction of having one state-of-the-art billiards table. The table was the cynosure of the club.

Now, the club in its original form is no more. In its stead is The Cue, a billiards and snooker cafe started by Rahim’s great grandson, Noor Zulsky Passela.

Abdul Rahim was a businessman. He was a venture capitalist of his era, self-employed and of financial means. Passela reminisced that soon after his marriage, Rahim and his new family moved into a small house, adjacent to the De Soysa building. With his workplace close to home, Rahim went on to make a name for himself as the owner of the Colombo Central Club. Eventually, he built a larger home for his family as well.

However, his home was one among 70,000 households on Java Lane in Slave Island that were demolished by the government in 2014, forcing the family to move into the De Soysa building. The demolition splintered the community. Passela claimed that his family never received compensation for their destroyed property.

After Rahim passed away, his two sons, N. A Rahim and N. J Rahim, would carry on the legacy of the club for several years and experience its golden era.

With time, the families expanded and moved away. After their grandfather’s home was demolished, one part of the family moved into the De Soysa building. But with no one to maintain the club and premises afterwards, the Central Club was shut down in 1971. The table was turned into an ironing board and then donated to the Moors Sport Club. It remains there to this day with a plaque that reads ‘The Rahim Brothers Table’. Interestingly enough, Sri Lanka’s first international billiards champion, M. J. M. Laffir, practised at the old club.

It would take several more years for Passela, the current owner, to take over the establishment and rekindle his family’s tradition. After having arrived to take care of his ailing father, Passela fashioned the Colombo Central Club into its modern-day avatar of a cafe. It also serves as the official headquarters of the Sri Lanka Association of Billiards and Snooker.

Our chance discovery of Colombo’s oldest billiards club led us down a path rich in history, memory and tragedy. It is a story of resistance, and of a community faced with the inevitability of change, struggling to hold on to their sense of identity. Passela’s cafe, built to honour the legacy of his grandfather and uncles, serves a dual purpose. It was built in the hope of preserving a past that stands to be lost, and to further a family tradition, all tied into a singular passion for sport.

This is embodied in the Wall of Honour that adorns an entire section of the cafe. Etched with the names of champions and record setters going back to 1948, this Wall of Honour serves as a reminder of past victories and accomplishments to new players. New additions are included for everyone to see. “This [wall] is as old as the club itself,” Passela said, proudly.

Facing the wall are family photos of Passela’s uncles, and their achievements and awards. His uncles, the Rahim Brothers, were celebrated airmen as well. The cafe is not only a museum for Passela’s family but also for the entire community in Slave Island.

There is a clear difference between pool, the popular recreational game, and billiards. “Anyone can learn to play pool. But you need years of experience and discipline to learn billiards and snooker,” Passela explained. “Once you get into billiards and snooker, you will never play pool again.”

Before a game, the billiard balls are set up using a triangle rack. Once the table is set, the first player will break the set up, commencing the game. There are numerous ways to play the game. Once a game is opened, a professional pair of players will take less than 15 minutes to finish the session. But if you’re just learning the ropes—or edges, in this case—things tend to drag on.

Passela has just one billiards table, much like in his grandfather’s club. “We have several tables that are not in use anymore due to the lack of space. It would be good to have more space but we are making do with what we have,” he said.

According to Passela, the club welcomes anyone who has a genuine interest in the game. “We don’t care [about your] ethnicity as long as you know how to behave,” he said. “You cannot smoke near the table, you cannot drink and you cannot fight. You fight outside. We have some good boys here. Even those who have gone abroad for work remember to return here during their holidays for a friendly game.”

The goal of billiards is to pocket the balls in a given order. The stack is broken apart, separating the multicoloured collective. Much like the multi-coloured billiard balls, the close-knit community in Slave Island is slowly being stripped of its sense of unity. The threat of being evicted and forced to uproot their livelihoods is ever present.

Some reports suggest that the demolition of the building may have been suspended for the time being. However, Passela remains pessimistic about the future.

“After me, I don’t know whether the club will go on,” he said. “If the government forces us to move again, if they want to demolish this building, it will all be for nothing. I will have to sell everything. We have to think of the children and the future, don’t we?”

The Wanathamulla area, situated in the heart of central Colombo, is considered one of the oldest low-income settlements in the major Colombo area. It has a vast, undocumented history. The first communities in Wanathamulla were built over mushy, wetland areas. These were followed by the first government-sponsored public housing projects, built on garbage dumps. From those early settlements to the modern day, Wanathamulla has had the unfortunate distinction of being an underserved community, rife with poverty, drugs and organised crime.

Like other underserved communities, one of the major issues plaguing Wanathamulla is the number of school dropouts. Despite the availability of basic facilities and infrastructure, children from Wanathamulla tend to discontinue mainstream education at some point of their childhood. Despite the presence of three major schools in the area, many of the children do not attend school.

Subsequently, they are left to find employment through other means – which often means peddling drugs or indulging in petty crimes. The reasons vary from finding occupation to provide an income for their families to falling in with the ‘wrong crowd’.

To find an enduring solution to these interconnected problems, the community has started its own Learning Centre.

The Wanathamulla Community Learning Centre is the sole education centre in the area that is community empowered and crowd funded. It is sustained by volunteer teachers, lecturers and researchers that seek to impart the fundamentals of education to a community of children who are otherwise deprived of it.

Kingsley Rajaratne is the founder of this institution. Having moved to Wanathamulla back in 2000, he has firsthand knowledge of what challenges the community faces.

While balancing his work at the Department of Posts, this frail and silent man in his fifties is passionate about changing the stereotypes the community has unwittingly adopted. An adamant believer in a ‘better Wanathamulla’, he has spearheaded a number of community initiatives. After being elected as a community leader at the Wanathamulla Community Union elections in 2011, Rajaratne constructed the Learning Centre in 2015, as a tool to empower children with education.

According to Rajaratne, the Learning Centre was built purely through a people’s process: that is, by mobilising the community and using the available talent, together with funds from the Sevanatha Urban Resource Centre and endowments received from the consolidated funds of the municipal council members. In other words, the Community Learning Centre was built by the neighbourhood itself.

“There are some children in this neighbourhood who drop out of school,” said Rajaratne. “They are barely supervised and are mostly neglected by their parents. These children get into drugs and the other vices that Wanathamulla is notorious for. The only way to overcome that is to give them a basic education, vocational training and proper recognition that would help them to find employment elsewhere.”

Migara\* is supposed to be in grade seven — that is, if he were attending school. But with both his parents being too busy to look after his educational wellbeing, Migara has been neglected. But with Rajaratne’s encouragement, Migara attends the classes at the Learning Centre, together with several other children from the area.

We first met him at Rajaratne’s home, when he came to announce that the children had tidied the classroom. He had run all the way there. Panting, the boy said, “Sir, madam. Good morning. ක්ලාස් එකට, එන්න.” (Come to the class)

A.B. Prelis and S. Prelis, an elderly couple who teach English to the group, smiled and greeted the child and jokingly said, “අපිට සිංහල බෑ. Say it in English.” (We can’t speak Sinhala. Say it in English) The boy shied away from a response. He looked down and smiled instead.

The Learning Centre has had two groups of children since its inception. They are taught English, Mathematics, mechanical work, sewing and the basics of Information Technology. On the Sunday we visited Wanathamulla, it was the beginning of the first class, and a new group had been just inducted at the beginning of the year. The group of eight children, all aged between 11 and 15, had gathered at the centre. The two teachers entered the room and the class was in session. Once the greetings died down, the day started with a song.

According to Rajaratne, the teachers and lecturers conduct classes every weekend on a voluntary basis. The retired teachers teach the children English and Mathematics, while a group of lecturers from the Moratuwa University teach Information Technology. The centre provides the children a certificate recognised by the National Institute of Education once they have completed the programme.

According to Rajaratne, he was motivated to start the learning centre because it is easier to change the mindset of children than that of adults.

“There are students who have dropped out of our programme,” he said. “I’m not saying it has been completely successful. However, there’s a clear difference we have managed to make in the children who took part in the course and even those who fell out. In the beginning, every weekend, we had to go talk to the parents and ask them to let their children attend classes. Now, it’s not so bad.”

For the Prelis’, serving this neglected community has meant overcoming the stereotypes they had once held about it.

They candidly recounted how they lost their way during their first visit to Wanathamulla, and how glad they were when the person who took their mobile phone to get directions from Rajaratne, didn’t run away with it. “The environment was completely new to us, coming from Colombo 07,” said Prelis. “When our students learned that we were going to teach a group of children in Wanathamulla, they warned us not to. They were afraid for us. But after the first visit, we learned that we are needed here. We wanted to spend days just walking down these small roads, talking to people.”

The Prelis’ have a genuine interest in educating the children, to help them escape the harsh judgements of society at large. Despite their enthusiasm, however, their mission remains an uphill one.

“No one is there to actively push [the children] to pursue a formal education,” said the couple. “Attendance has always been irregular; children tend to drop out because they don’t get attention at home. They are not motivated enough to join these classes. Children who join prestigious schools have ambitions of one day becoming doctors or engineers. Not here, though.”

Owning a gun in Sri Lanka is harder than you think – and justifiably so.

Mohan de Lanerolle (75), ‘Loni’ to his friends and family, belies his age. Now retired, he hunts and fishes during his leisure time, and tends to his massive garden with his wife Monica. For company, he has a Beagle, a Chihuahua and a variety of exotic birds, including a rather jealous blue-and-yellow macaw named Papaya, a parakeet called Luke, and a 44-year-old Amazon parrot. However, one of the more fascinating things he does in his retirement is breeding and training homing pigeons for pigeon racing, a recognised sport in Sri Lanka.

Homing pigeons (Columbia livia) are unique; they have been recognised and prized for their navigational abilities for thousands of years. They have been used as messengers during war, for long distance communication, and as ‘athletes’ in international races. Pigeons are a subject of scientific curiosity, particularly when it comes to their ability to navigate long distances accurately and efficiently. There are many theories surrounding their ability to find their way home, ranging from magnetic resonance detection to their use of infrasound maps. Despite the general mystery that surrounds it, this ability can be honed in pigeons that are specifically bred and trained for this purpose.

Enter Loni, who has bred and trained ‘homers’—his nickname for homing pigeons—for over 15 years. His earliest recollection of witnessing the unique abilities of homing pigeons is from when he was a teenager.

"My family had pigeons at our home in Moratuwa,” he said. “My pater (father) and I were rather fond of them. Once, my father had to go to Puttalam for some business and I was to accompany him. Naturally I took the pigeons with me. It was raining heavily when we arrived in Puttalam and my father did not want to release them from their cages. But I remember being adamant, and I released them, knowing they would return.”

However, as it turned out, they did not return. They saw the released pigeons quickly taking shelter under various roofs and trees to escape from the heavy downpour. Much to the disappointment of his father, they had to return to Moratuwa without the birds. The next day, almost 12 hours later, Loni noticed that the home cages were once again full. The pigeons had found their way home.

"Afterwards, my interest in the hobby and the creatures grew,” said Loni. “I became fond of them. And every bird I bred grew to know and love me. They recognised me whenever I entered the coops. Anywhere I went, I would take them and release them. And they would return home promptly.”

He told us how a pair of pigeons imported from Germany to Sri Lanka escaped quarantine, only to return to Frankfurt several weeks later.

Homing pigeons can fly distances of over 1,000 miles to reach their destinations. The furthest distance a homer has covered is a staggering 7,200 miles (or roughly over 11,000 km) at approximately 50 miles per hour.

Loni currently owns around 50 birds, all of which are over 12 years old and bred at his ‘ark’ in Wattala. He tells us that the oldest pair is around 17 years old.

“You have to take them when they are young in order to train them. It’s hard to train adult pigeons. Young birds and hatchlings are kept inside the coop for a month.Once they reach a certain age, they are allowed to go out with the other pigeons,” he explained.

His method has proved effective so far. He has bred over 60 pigeons from a parent stock from Germany, which he says cost him nearly Rs. 50,000 in the year 2000. The pigeons are occasionally released from various locations besides home to test their return time. Loni's pigeons have set record times during racing events. His pigeons released from Jaffna and Point Pedro have returned home in less than five hours, while the ones released from Puttalam took less than two hours. They completed the journey from Vavuniya in three hours, and from Trincomalee in four. They have also flown home from Kandalama in record time.

The birds need regular exercise to build stamina, which is essential for them to complete long journeys. They are released from their coops once a day, after being fed a diet of various grains and nuts. The birds are released in batches, allowing one group to lead the others over and around Wattala. Once they are airborne, the cages are cleaned and washed to avoid the spread of bacteria and the spread of disease.

“My birds can fly home from anywhere in the country,” said Loni. “But I have lost a lot of birds too. They never came back.”

The biggest threat to the pigeons are falcons. Over the years, Loni has lost a number of birds due to falcon attacks, some even during races. Showing us an injured bird, with a gash under its wing, he said, “Peregrine falcons are a constant threat to homing pigeons. Falcons are regularly found in rural areas, although they are also common in urban areas. They usually nest in telephone towers.”

Pigeon racing is not new to Sri Lanka. Mostly practised in urban zones, pigeon races are popular in Colombo, Kandy and Vavuniya.

The Sri Lankan Racing Pigeon Federation, the first pigeon racing club in the country to conduct races in an organised manner, was established in 2014. The race locations change regularly, adding variety and challenge to the races.

The annual racing event is organised by the Federation. In every race, breeders and their blindfolded birds are brought to a certain location. The birds are then tagged using a special identification and number. The race starts when the cages are opened, and the birds are expected to fly back to their home lofts. The home cages are monitored; arrivals are documented with videos as evidence and the time of arrival is noted. The arrival time is then reported to the organisers with the identification tag in order to ascertain the winners. The first bird to come home is declared the winner. Following which, the distance from the releasing point to home is calculated as well.

Loni was placed second in the last race that took place in October this year. He lost the first place by a margin of only a few seconds, he said. In an event featuring roughly 800 birds from ten breeders, Loni’s second place is lucky enough. However, he is understandably a little disappointed.

The federation remains dedicated despite the fact that the races have not achieved official status and lack widespread recognition. After every race, prize money and awards are given to all the winners and participants. Even though the federation continues to expand every year, funding that is obtained through donations and the auctioning of birds, is hard to come by. M. H. M. Ajmeer, the president of the Federation, claims that this lack of official recognition is the biggest threat to the sport.

“When the races started there were only 28 members with around 20-40 birds,” he said. “At present, we have grown to 350 members from all over the country. During the last racing event, we didn’t have enough cages to transport the birds. So we had to organise the event during the span of a weekend. We released 650 pigeons from Vavuniya and 160 pigeons from Kandy. Yet we have no proper recognition from the authorities.”

Although the sport has its critics, particularly within law enforcement, Ajmeer says their practice of it is perfectly lawful. “Law enforcement harass us almost all the time,” he said. “They have accused us of trafficking drugs and narcotics using our pigeons. [But] we are trained, disciplined and dedicated to this sport. We do not have to resort to crime.”

Cover credit: Jamie Alphonsus / Roar Media

Sri Lanka witnessed a record number of casualties due to natural disasters last year. As a result, the country has been ranked second in the Global Climate Index, which ranks the countries that are most susceptible to climate change.

Corporal Gamini Karunaratne was injured on the front-line of the war and lost both his legs. Nine years later, he took a courageous journey from Point Dondra to Point Pedro, on his lightweight wheelchair.

Approximately 40,000 elephants are poached annually. With a global elephant population of less than 500,000, it is no surprise the numbers are dropping exponentially every day. It is believed that for every 15 minutes, an elephant is killed in Kenya for its ivory. Needless to say, the number of prosecuted poachers are nothing close to the number of casualties; reason being the difficulty in catching them in the act. And these are just elephants we are talking about; a number of species, around the world are endangered or at the brink of extinction due to the effects of poaching.

Earlier this year, a group of scientists published a paper on a study of how poached ivory is transported from one country to another by elephant poachers and export cartels. Researchers conducted the study by examining genetic data extracted from seized elephant ivory and tracing it back to the animal’s country origin thus connecting it to transnational trafficking crimes.

Wildlife forensics and the aforementioned method of DNA tracking, is a relatively new field in science. However, it has proved its worth in law enforcement against the ever-expanding transnational crime of poaching and flora/fauna trafficking.

Counter poaching mechanisms that are prominently dependent on wildlife forensics have become essential in law enforcement, and is widely practiced in the African plains plagued by poachers and wildlife traffickers. These mechanism include the identifying necessary evidence in prosecuting suspects in a scientific manner, in a court of law.

In a recent public lecture organised by the Wildlife and Nature Protection Society (WNPS), Ravi Perera—a hardboiled Crime Scene Investigator active in Kenya and founder of Serendipity Wildlife, announced the need to initiate a similar mechanism project in Sri Lanka.

In his lecture, he noted how Kenyan poachers escape prosecution more often than not due to the lack of evidence. "The poachers after hunting down elephants or rhinos discard the weapons that were used in the act. Even if the weapon is found by the authorities, unless it's forensically analysed, it would not assist the case against the criminals. This becomes a serious problem when dealing with the issue," he said. The most common method of poaching elephants in Sri Lanka is shooting, while wild boars are poached using firearms as well as hakka patas. Suspects once arrested, on almost all cases, are released on fines.

As a result of the increased poaching, he claimed, the West African rhinos have become nearly extinct, making poachers move towards the Eastern parts of the continent.

"Poachers are paid a meagre USD 200 for a rhino horn which is subsequently sold for a much higher price."

According to him Sri Lankan game hunting and poaching is primarily done for the sale of meat or other organs; while in Kenya, animals are also poached for personal consumption, trafficking, and exportation.

Environmental lawyer, Jagath Gunawardena, told Roar Media that certain plants and animals in Sri Lanka are protected from poaching under the supreme provisions of the Flora and Fauna Ordinance. Article 30 of the Ordinance dictates the illegality of poaching protected species under any circumstance, and doing so could lead to the arrest of the suspect without a warrant upon which he/she could face a prison sentence for upto two years, and a fine between Rs. 20,000 - Rs. 50,000.

“However,” he emphasised, “the mechanism in which it is implemented is not strong enough.”

Gunawardene highlighted that poaching, while not so prominent in Sri Lanka when compared to other countries, sees an increase during the dry periods of the year. “Poaching is reported during the drought seasons of the first and third quarters of the the year. During a drought, animals tend to travel in open spaces looking for water; this makes them vulnerable to poachers."

According to Gunawardene, the priorities of the local poacher lies in selling the meat. Wild boar and deer meat are sold to restaurants and individuals and it is only rarely that poached meat is used for domestic consumption.

Ravi Perera emphasised on a number of methods in which suspects are prosecuted using forensics when it comes to crimes against wildlife.

Gunshot residue detection is one such method in which ammunition and shell casing recovered from a crime scene is used to identify suspects of a crime. In most cases, K9 units—specially trained dogs—are used to locate ammunition shells that have been left behind at a crime scene. Gunshot residue testing, which is a common method of obtaining and comparing evidence in law enforcement when it comes to 'normal crimes', is utilised in the same way in wildlife forensics, he said..

Referring to Kenya as an example, Perera observed how the country takes a strict stand against poaching. K9 units are common in airports and traffic posts, and are used to sniff out trafficked wildlife resources, such as ivory in luggage. In the case of Sri Lanka, most cases are reported on tip-offs and complaints made by individuals--more often, villagers, to the authorities that is either the Police or the Wildlife Department. Following which an investigation is commenced.

Perera also noted that together with the WNPS, a fingerprint database exclusive for environmental crimes—poaching and its like, or in other words, any act that violates the Flora and Fauna Ordinance—is in the pipelines, and will be introduced to the country by 2019. A computerised fingerprint database active on a national scale would provide in the identification of individuals of criminal history.

According to Ranil Peiris, Vice President of WNPS, the proposal is still in conceptual stages with discussions being held with the relevant authorities. If a database is established it will function, hopefully, independent of the existing police criminal fingerprint databases, and will be maintained by the Wildlife Department; as per the proposal made by Perera and the WNPS. As of now the only fingerprint database for criminals is maintained by the Sri Lanka Police.

“Ravi Perera’s proposal is to establish a fingerprint database, much like the one utilised in the United States, with the exclusive purpose of enforcing law against criminals who perpetrate wildlife crimes. The database will assist in identifying offenders and repeat offenders. What happens most often than not in Sri Lanka is that when a poacher or any other wildlife offender is arrested, there will be a ‘mudalali’ to pay off the fine or bail charges. However, with the evidence provided through a database, repeat offenders can be identified, allowing a court of law to take necessary action.”

He noted that crimes against wildlife are not viewed with the same severity as crimes committed against people, which has led to authorities giving the former, less attention. “In addition to that, there are challenges when introducing these mechanisms to government institutions,” he said.

In Sri Lanka, the wild boar, the spotted deer and the sambur, despite of being protected species, face a greater risk of being poached. Due to various complaints to the Ministry of Agriculture regarding the harmful impact the species has on farms and crops, the Government recently issued directives legalising transport and sale of wild boar meat. As a result, environmentalists have predicted that this could threaten the wild boar population in the country.

Prominent elephant expert and former Director General of the Wildlife Department, Sumith Pilapitiya revealed that only one out of five elephant deaths were related to poaching. Four of the elephant deaths were due to the Human-Elephant Conflict (HEC).

“There’s a clear cut way of recognising a poached elephant carcass: the lack of tusks, as they were cut off. And in Sri Lanka, only 5-6% of the elephant population are male tuskers, making poaching far less of a threat than HEC,” Pilapitiya said.

According to Gunawardene, there have also been instances where the barking deer and the mouse deer were poached for their meat.

Furthermore, a recent trend in poaching pangolins for their meat and scales (which are allegedly famous as an aphrodisiac in the black market, and sought for export) was witnessed in the country. Comparing this to the sudden surge in the number of incidents concerning edible bird nests of Indian Swiftlets that were illegally exported out of the country, Gunawardene noted, "these cases mushroom regularly prompting authorities to take action. However, it always has a slumbering period, when vigilance lessens through time, leading for more such cases to occur after subsequent time has passed."

“While the poaching of thresher sharks for extreme sport has been brought under control; the poaching of turtles, whales and porpoises still remains a cause of concern. Out of all sea creatures, the Dugong has suffered the most,” opined Gunawardene.

If it is new to the world, then forensic wildlife is undoubtedly unheard of in Sri Lanka, one would assume. However, according to Gunawardene, it is essential nevertheless.

"Wildlife forensics need to be introduced and developed in the country. Training of authorities and individuals in gathering expert evidence is essential to pin down perpetrators. Such experts should be included into the governing bodies handling wildlife and fisheries with proper training. There's no harm in adopting this. If not, when such a situation, which can be prevented through such means arise and we do not have the basics in place, we are bound to face a dilemma."

Cover image courtesy: Getty images

The Sri Lankan Constitution is on everyone’s mind at present. Given the long Constitutional crisis the country is facing at present, one is left wondering: are we truly conversant of our Constitution? As citizens of this country, how fluent and aware are we of our own civil rights?

The Constitution is arguably, the only physical manifestation of the social contract every citizen of a nation state enters into at the moment of birth. It is the sole document and piece of legislature that birthed the country’s entire judiciary and legal system, the separation of the powers that be and profess what we the citizens, can and cannot do, what we are entitled to and what responsibilities we must uphold; as long as we wish to remain citizens of this nation state. Yet, we see this single most significant set of principles that govern the law of the land being dissimilated.

Sri Lanka is facing a crossroads following the decision taken by President Maithripala Sirisena to appoint former President and strongarm politician, Mahinda Rajapaksa as Prime Minister. The ousting of Prime Minister of the coalition Government, Ranil Wickremesinghe, has been publically deemed as the greatest violation of our existing Constitution. A poll carried out by The Sunday Times revealed that over 80% of the public have asserted that the President's decision was morally incorrect, while approximately 60% claimed that President Sirisena dissolving Parliament subsequent to the controversial dismissal of the coalition government was unconstitutional.

Many believe the snowballing Constitutional crisis in the country to be a result of a misinterpreted reading of the legislation. Arguably constant inconsistencies found in the legislation make our legal system a flawed one. According to experts, these ambiguities, more often than not, may lead to misinterpretations, much like the present situation in the country, where legislators take action which does more harm than good.

Dr. Jayampathy Wickramaratne, member of the steering committee of the Constitutional Assembly of Sri Lanka, gave examples of such inconsistencies, including that of translation errors, which led to the justification of President's authority in dismissing and appointing the Prime Minister.

“You take the Constitution as a whole when interpreting it," Dr. Wickramaratne told Roar Media. "If it was an amendment, what was the earlier position? Why was it changed? If it was done consequent to an election pledge, what happened in the election? You cannot interpret Constitutions in a vacuum or in the air.”

He highlighted a particular incident that occurred following the establishment of the North Eastern Provincial Council in the late 1980s as per the 13th Amendment to the Constitution. Based on the provisions (regulation of road passenger carriage services and the carriage of goods by motor vehicles within the province and the provisions of inter-provincial road transport services), in the Provincial Council List of the Amendment, the North Eastern Province had issued a statute regulating public transport to and fro from other provinces and declared themselves as the sole licensing authority for entrance into the province.

“The inclusion of ‘inter-provincial’ and not ‘intra-provincial,’ is the mistake here,” Wickramaratne explained. “The same mistake has been made in both the Sinhala and Tamil text of the Constitution. It was a drafting mistake that has been carried into the translations. The matter went to the Supreme Court, which ruled in favour of the decision. However, it noted that national transport is under the purview of the Central Government — which is again not specified in the Constitution. However, because it deals with national transport, it was interpreted as a mistake. And this must be read as intra-provincial transport. Mistakes can happen.”

Inconsistencies lead to confusion, sets a bad precedent and eventually would lead to more problems than any good. The matter is worse when the errors are made in important legislature such as the Constitution; as seen in the pandemonium caused in Parliament whenever a session is called. Thus, the essential need of legal literacy and awareness in a nation state.

Legal literacy is defined as the empowerment of individuals regarding issues involving the law. Public education of law is dependent first and foremost on the local education system.

The local curriculum, predominantly the GCE Ordinary Level stream, is the sole instance where a student would learn about the country's Constitution and the fundamental rights a citizen is entitled to.

The first mention of the Constitution in our general education curriculum is made in Grade 7, as a small part of Civic Education. According to the 2008 teachers’ guide to the subject, the Constitution of Sri Lanka, “allows its citizens to accept any religion, to talk any language, to have any belief, to live in any place of the country and to enjoy the culture either alone or with others.”

The Constitution is revisited again in Grade 10 Civic Education, which discusses the subject a bit more extensively. An entire chapter is dedicated to the Constitution, the evolution of the Donoughmore and Soulbury Constitution and the comeabout of the existing Constitution which has gone through 19 amendments since inception. It then goes on to explain how it is administered, how the administrators are governed by the Constitution, and provisions for the system of government, institutions and the rights of citizens.

Students are taught the responsibilities of a citizen as stated in section (a) to (f) of Article 28 of the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 1978 and the Presidential and Parliamentary system. A minimum of eight periods have been recommended by the education guidelines to teach Grade 10 students about democracy, democratic governance, elections, state and government, and the responsibilities of citizens.

Civic Education remains outside the list of compulsory subjects, as a decision made by the Education Ministry. As a basket subject, it is one that students can either select or opt out of. As far as formal education goes, this is all it has to offer unless a student chooses Political Science for their GCE Advanced Level.

Dr. Wickramaratne, who emphasised that the government played a key role in improving access to justice and legal literacy in the country noted that, legal literacy is an issue even in the United States. "The lack of legal literacy is an issue with access to justice. Legal experts are working on it constantly. Not everybody is conversant with these things. They go by opinions,” he added.

Former President of the Bar Council of Sri Lanka, President's Counsel Upul Jayasuriya claimed that legal awareness is completely different to the sense of justice which Sri Lankans possess.

"We have a very good sense of right and wrong but that might not be the same for when it comes to legal literacy in the country," he emphasised. "The Sri Lankan public has poor knowledge about what provisions are available to suit their situation, but they can distinguish the difference of what's right and wrong."

According to him, the public outcry for justice and democracy following the initiation of the ongoing crisis in the country, stands as the perfect example to it.

"Legal opinion might vary. But at the end of the day, that happens due to our opinions which are based on agenda-driven individuals dictating the terms. The media in most cases, is controlled or favoured by the state, thereby leading to incorrect opinion. In situations like these when independent parties have pointed out unbiased opinions, we still see a prevalence where certain parties that justify the President's actions,” Jayasuriya said. Elaborating on the matter further, he added that while everyone is entitled to their opinion, there's only so much a learned individual and his/her informed opinion can do. Thereafter there's nothing they can do but sit back and watch what happens."

While legal literacy is evidently dependent on education, there is also an aspect of it which survives on social interaction and social conversation. Similarly, access to justice plays an integral part of a community’s legal literacy.

The foremost institution that promotes access to justice in Sri Lanka under the purview of the government is the Legal Aid Commission. International communities as well as civil society organisations have and are providing assistance regularly, through the organisation of public campaigns, workshops which inform disadvantaged communities.

For instance, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) together with local institutions, has projects all over the world working towards improving access to justice.

These projects contributed to increasing awareness of local communities to improve legal aid services and access to legal documentation, with particular attention on the conflict-affected Eastern and Northern parts of the country. The projects also intervened on behalf of other disadvantaged groups like the internally displaced, due to natural disasters such as the 2004 tsunami, annual flooding and landslide disasters, estate sector workers, pre-trial detainees, female heads of households, and victims of gender based violence.

The fact remains that it is community groups and non-governmental organisations that have a greater impact on affected communities when it comes to spreading awareness and literacy. The best example being the number of groups lobbying for reforms in the Muslim Marraige and Divorce Act (MMDA) in Sri Lanka.

As the popular saying goes, “justice delayed is justice denied”. Sri Lanka has already a staggering number of cases, numbering around 750,000, which are delayed within the system. In such a scenario, the public interest and trust in justice served is facing a chain of events leading to disaster that cannot be avoided, when matters such as the deepening constitutional crisis is left unresolved.

Colombo has been declared an internationally recognised wetland city due to the number of wetland zones within the city. Rapidly increasing high rise buildings and urbanisation continues to be a threat to such areas. Will the declaration make a difference in policy making?

There was a time when being labelled a ‘nerd’ meant you were the laughing stock at your school or your workplace. But the term has taken on a new meaning in recent times, and is often used in relation to pop culture and ‘geekism’ in the modern era—and being a ‘nerd’ (or a ‘geek’) is now celebrated worldwide.

Sri Lanka is no exception—we have our own comic con complete with dedicated (and talented!) cosplayers, our very own comic books, merchandise collectors, video games, board games and whatnot.

A collector’s edition graphic novel series from DC Comics. Image courtesy eaglemoss.com

Geek merchandise can be defined as a number of products, such as comics, statues, video games, toys, posters, collectibles, figurines, and all the other various items that are produced after branded products by various artists, designers, and creators. Most of this merchandise can be found overseas and is widely available for purchase on the internet.

Collectors’ interests can vary, as do the wide array of merchandise that is available. There are comic book and graphic novel collectors, scale model collectors, and figurine and statue collectors. The best place to find them in Sri Lanka would be here.

Avid collectors go to great lengths when trying to locate comic books and merchandise of their interests in Sri Lanka. Their only resort is, of course, purchasing them online (unless they, or somebody they know, is lucky enough to make a trip abroad), because the Sri Lankan market has not allocated enough space for the geeks.

Chicago Comics, one of the largest comic book stores in Chicago, USA. Image courtesy timeout.com/Emily Madigan

But even then, collectors have to face exorbitant shipping prices, clearance charges, service charges, hassle at the Sri Lanka Customs when clearing their products, and having to explain their unique interests to the local authorities. (Imagine having to explain your X-Men obsession that led to your purchase of a replica of Wolverine’s claws, to a suspicious Customs officer, who sees the product as a weapon rather than a toy.)

Likewise, even though there were a few local bookstores that brought down several comic books and graphic novels in the past, you don’t see them that often anymore. Some claim that it’s because there’s no proper market for it, and the imported books will only collect dust on the shelves, which will be a loss to the company.

However, since of late, several groups of likeminded individuals with a passion for all things geeky and nerdy have created a niche market in this island nation that cater to the needs of all collectors.

So, if you’re a collector—amateur or professional—or even someone who’s interested in starting their own collection, this list might just come in handy.

Collectique came into play rather recently, but was able to take the niche market of collectors by storm, offering a wide variety of merchandise shipped straight from the US or other countries.

A Spider-Man statue displayed once upon a time at Collectique. Image courtesy Eternal Moments Studios.

Collectique opened its brand new gallery in Kotte recently, and hopes to provide a bigger service to collectors around the country. If that’s too far for you, you can also order through their online store and Facebook page. This writer includes a warning in here, however, as the merchandise Collectique has to offer is bound to empty out your wallet and create a significant dent in your bank account eventually—even if you’re not a collector but just an average joe who enjoys a comic book movie every now and then, you will find yourself irrevocably in love with some of the statues/figurines that are on display at the Collectique store. (We may be speaking from personal experience).

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They specialise in comic books, graphic novels—old, rare, or new—and the occasional statue, action figure, or toy. You can pre-order your choice on their website or drop them a message on Facebook.

The Red Dot Geek is a bit of a nomad. You’re likely to find him and his stall at any geek festival/celebration or book-related event. Image courtesy writer

Big Boy Toys has been on somewhat of a hiatus lately, but it’s not for the lack of quality service.

Featuring a wide variety of merchandise and collectibles, Big Boy Toys is only a call away (or a message away, if you would prefer that) for you to order or pre-order your product and have it delivered to your doorstep at a reasonable price.

In spite of its name, Big Boy Toys is very serious about their passion towards all things geek. Image courtesy Big Boy Toys

There aren’t many of those who have come across this mysterious trader, who, as the legend goes, is a one-man team dealing in your geeky needs. Action-Figures.lk specialises in importing Eagle Moss statuettes—which are basically pint-sized figurines of various characters from movies, television series, cartoons, and comic books.

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And the Age of Ultron continues… on a miniature scale. Image courtesy Kanagalingam Rishidaran

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As a result, the inception of Funko SL was inevitable. Although not an official part of the Funko mothership, Funko SL brings down merchandise from the beloved collections of the US and Canada to Sri Lanka, depending on your orders.

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Yamato One is all about the Japanese anime fans in Sri Lanka and fulfilling their wide-eyed needs about everything anime. Right now they sell through their Facebook page where they actively engage with their enthusiastic and loyal customers. They also have an online store that delivers island-wide. But soon you will be able to find them at a physical store in Rajagiriya. They’re just waiting for the place to be built.

Alongside their anime and manga collection, Yamato One also caters to video game fans, providing an array of merchandise from popular video games as well.

Custom art by Faniacs. Image courtesy Faniacs Facebook page

Faniacs is where you go to, when you want to show off your geek cred to the world. Dealing in t-shirts, sketch books and posters that depict all things awesome and geek, this is definitely a place you need to check out.

The unique thing about Faniacs is that they have their own network of artists and designers that make unique, custom art for their products. So in a way, it’s limited edition, making it all the more precious.

Faniacs can be contacted via their Facebook page and their online store. You can also find their merchandise at the Collectique store and gallery in Kotte.

If philately is something that you would consider “not-hip” for this day and age despite its immense popularity, collecting geek merchandise may be right up your alley. It’s true that it can be an expensive hobby, but one that adds variety to life—and a little colour to your interior decor.

In case this article has struck a chord with the collector in you, you’d be happy to know that Red Dot Geek, Collectique, Yamato One, and Faniacs have confirmed as vendors at Lanka Comic Con 2017. Drop by the SLECC on August 26‒27 to check them out.

With added contributions by Dilina Amaruwan.

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As many overseas travellers are aware, the Bandaranaike International Airport (BIA) underwent a major facelift at the beginning of this year, and closed down its runway for eight hours a day, for three months straight, so that long overdue renovation could take place.

Although the runway is now fully operational once again, it came as a rude shock when a recent report pointed out that the newly renovated runway still fails to meet international standards required to accommodate larger aircraft.

In the ensuing confusion, the CAASL has claimed that upgrading the runway (to a ‘Code F’ status) was never the intention to begin with, but that the current runway can still accommodate larger aircraft such as the Airbus A380.

Roar checked with authorities to shed some light on the situation.

The official website of the Civil Aviation Authority of Sri Lanka (CAASL) contains a proposal titled Resurfacing of the Runway at the BIA, Katunayake: Policy and Procedures Document. At a glance, the document mentions the need to modernise the BIA runway in order to meet international standards.

According to this document, one of the primary aims of the project was to renovate the tarmac so that it would accommodate Airbus A380 aircraft.

Prior to renovation, the runway measured a length of 3,350 metres and a width of 45 metres, with a 76.5-metre shoulder on either side. The pre-renovation tarmac was unable to hold A380s ‒ the outermost engines of the aircraft would be outside the paved runway.

The document also claims that the pre-renovation BIA tarmac, designed as an International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) Code 4-E, can accommodate for critical aircraft Boeing B-747 movements ‒ over a period of 20 years, with 10,000 movements per year. Construction on the BIA and its single tarmac was completed in 1986, so this year’s renovations (the first since the runway began operations) came thirty-one years later ‒ and eleven years overdue.

According to authorities, the runway surface had also shown some alligator cracks, which, if left unattended while continuing to use the runway, could lead to a major failure of the surface condition, resulting in a serious safety hazard.

Hence, the CAASL and the Ministry of Transport and Aviation Services noted it was vital that the runway resurfacing be carried out at the earliest.

As per the proposal, the Rs. 7.2 billion renovation project was expected to achieve the following:

As is clear in the above proposals, one of the aims was to widen the runway shoulders “to meet modified code F operations” ‒ which is where most of the confusion now stems from.

Earlier this month (on April 9), the Sunday Times reported that, in spite of the renovations, the BIA’s runaway will not receive the ICAO-accepted classification for runways capable of accommodating new, larger aircraft such as Airbus A380s ‒ or ‘Code F’ classification.

As the report points out, the BIA’s renovated runway measures 45 metres in width, with shoulders on either side of 15 metres each ‒ but a Code F runway requires a 60-metre width runway.

The report also claims that the CAASL had promoted inaccurate resurfacing standards of the runway in their proposals to the project. Accordingly, the renovation conducted on the runway has only resulted in some minor changes, all the while retaining the status of a Code E runway. Furthermore, there was confusion regarding what the Airport and Aviation Services Ltd (AASL) had called a ‘modified Code F’ runway.

Roar contacted Director General of the CAASL, H. M. C. Nimalsiri, to obtain a clarification ‒ particularly with regard to the part of the proposal that mentioned the airport tarmac being modified to reach a Code F status after the resurfacing programme.

Interestingly, DG Nimalsiri stated that this was not what the CAASL had planned in the first place.

“The particular wording in the proposal had come from the Airport and Aviation Services Ltd. The CAASL did not pay that much attention to their wording,” he said, adding that “There is nothing called a ‘modified Code F’ standard that was proposed or planned for the project. The crux of our project is mentioned ‒ ‘to widen the shoulders of the tarmac’ ‒ but the modified Code F proposal is inappropriate. It was an error made by the Airport and Aviation Services Ltd. The Code F is recommended for new airports that are being constructed. Even if you’re constructing a new runway, you have to follow the Code F specifications. But an operational runway cannot be upgraded to a Code F tarmac,” he said.

According to Nimalsiri, the CAASL’s priority was to resurface the runway in order to accommodate A380 aircrafts ‒ not aim for ‘Code F’ classification.

“Under the pre-renovation condition, the airport tarmac came under the ICAO category of Code E. We never wanted it to be upgraded to Code F, because in order to do that, the width of the tarmac has to be increased from 45 metres to 60 metres,” he said, adding that, in order to do this, two tunnels of a 15 metre width would have had to be dug alongside the existing runway.

This would not have been possible, he pointed out, because all renovations had to be carried out while the airport and the runway were in operation. “We only shut it down for eight hours per day, while the rest of the day it was active for traffic,” Nimalsiri explained. “You cannot have a big tunnel right at the edge of an operational airport runway; in case an aircraft veers during takeoff or landing, it would have been disastrous,” he added.

In trying to find a solution, the CAASL says they had looked to other countries. Accordingly, they had proposed to make upgrades to the runway shoulders to accommodate A380s, which have a wide wingspan of 80 metres.

“In this case, it’s not the width of the runway itself that is the issue, but the two extreme engines on the wings of an A380 aircraft. When A380s are operated on a Code E runway, the outermost engines go over the area which is not paved,” Nimalsiri said. “What most of the civil air administrations do, is widen the runway shoulders so that the outer engines of the plane would also go over the paved runway. As a result, the possibility of foreign objects coming into the runway which could cause harm to an aircraft was minimised. We had done the same thing here with the BIA runway. We planned and did this and there’s hardly any difference. We knew what we were doing and we achieved what we planned to do. And now it is capable of accommodating A380 aircraft,” claimed Nimalsiri.

According to Nimalsiri, it was the AAS who set the scope for the renovation, while the CAASL was the regulator in the matter. In the meantime, the CAASL is also not aware of the final budget of the now concluded project.

“We do not know the final cost of the project since the CAASL does not get involved in finances. The cost was handled by the AAS,” Nimalsiri noted.

Airport and Aviation Services Ltd. when contacted refused to comment on the matter.

Featured image courtesy YouTube

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So, if you’re a collector – amateur or professional – or even someone who’s interested in starting their own collection, this list might just come in handy.

By far, the only physical location that engages customers is a store selling statues, toys, rare comic books and other collectibles. Collectique came into play rather recently, but was able to take the niche market of collectors by a storm, offering a wide variety of merchandise shipped straight from the US or other countries.

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Hopefully, this article was able to tap into the collector in you ‒ and if you know of any other places that would help your fellow geeks out, do share them in the comments below.

Featured image courtesy: sideshow.com

Eight Sri Lankan sailors recently had a close shave with several Somali pirates who captured an oil tanker they were onboard. After being held for ransom for nearly a week, the pirates released the vessel along with the crew, who arrived at their destination safely.

There was a time, however, when pirate encounters rarely ended well.

Piracy is often defined as the act of robbery or criminal violence by ship, typically with the goal of stealing cargo.

The earliest documented instances of piracy were in the 14th century BC from Greece, when the Sea Peoples, a group of ocean raiders hailing from unconfirmed ethnicities (although many believe they were of Eastern European origin), attacked the ships of the Aegean sea and Mediterranean civilisations. They were also famous for raiding Ancient Egyptian ships to loot gold.

Then, of course, there was the Golden Age of Piracy of the early modern period, spanning from the 1650s to the 1730s. Most of us have heard of notorious pirates such as Edward “Blackbeard” Thatch and Charles Vane through works such as Pirates of the Caribbean (sadly, Captain Jack Sparrow was purely fictional). This was the height of plunder and mayhem in the seven seas, until it all ended in 1726.

Afterwards, sea piracy dwindled, but had paved the way for modern day pirates. Surprisingly, Sri Lanka has also been associated with pirates and their misadventures through the years.

Although the reality can be very different, fiction has a tendency to romanticise the idea of pirates. Perhaps the most popular and good-natured sailor in the history of fiction, Sinbad was part heroic pirate, and part adventurer. Hailing from the One Thousand and One Nights in its late revisals, The Tales of Sinbad the Sailor relates the stories of a sailor of Middle Eastern origin, who voyages through the seas east of Africa and south of Asia and becomes unwittingly part of fantastic adventures, visiting magical places, and encountering monsters and other bewildering supernatural phenomena.

According to the tales, in his sixth and seventh voyages, Sinbad is shipwrecked ‒ not for the first time ‒ when his ship violently dashes to pieces against the tall cliffs of an unknown island. Sinbad later learns that he has landed on the western coast of Serendib where he eventually meets some locals who take him to the unnamed king of then.

Sinbad is received well by the king, treated with gifts for his stories about the Arabian Caliphate, and is provided the opportunity to return to Baghdad. Sinbad’s story mentions Adam’s Peak which is “conspicuous from a distance of three days, and it containeth many kinds of rubies and other minerals, and spice trees of all sorts. The surface is covered with emery wherewith gems are cut and fashioned; diamonds are in its rivers and pearls in its river valleys.”

Among the gifts given to Sinbad, is a cup carved from a single ruby. Also, Sinbad encounters the legendary Rocs, which feast on elephants right in front of the shocked sailor.

Ibn Battuta was a medieval Moroccan traveller and scholar and is generally considered one of the greatest travellers of all times ‒ and this island is among the many places on the map of his travels.

Ibn Battuta travelled across South Asia from 1332 to 1347 and documented his travels extensively in his journals ‒ many that have been found and curated. During his the nine months that he lived in the Maldives (where his ship crashed), he visited Sri Lanka on several pilgrimages, including to Adam’s Peak and the Tenavaram Hindu Temple in Matara.

According to the Premodern Travel in World History by Stephen Gosch and Peter Stearns, Ibn Battuta, while returning to the Maldives after touring Sri Lanka, was attacked by pirates of Southern India and Southeast Asia. The pirates stole all the precious jewels he had been given in Sri Lanka during his pilgrimages. Battuta is quoted: “They left nothing on my body except my trousers.”

Returning to modern times, many would recall that Sri Lanka had its own ‘pirates’, not too long ago.

The notorious Sea Tigers (the naval arm of the LTTE separatist rebels) was also known for its acts of sea piracy.

Founded in 1984, the primary objective of the LTTE’s naval unit was to smuggle personnel and equipment between LTTE bases in Tamil Nadu and Jaffna. The Sea Tigers were also accused of hijacking ships and boats, outside Sri Lankan waters. The most noted cases are of the MV Irish Mona, the Malaysian MV Sik Yang and the famous Jordanian vessel MV Farah III.

On August 30, 1995, the Sea Tigers hijacked MV Irish Mona, a ferry transporting 128 passengers from Karaitivu to Trincomalee. The ferry was intercepted by the Sea Tigers after the naval units attacked and sunk two Sri Lankan naval gunboats that came to assist the ferry passengers.

On May 25, 1999, the LTTE hijacked the MV Sik Yang, a 2,818-ton Malaysian cargo ship carrying bagged salt, which was sailing from Tuticorin in India, and used it as a phantom vessel. The fate of its 63-member crew remains unknown.

However, the most famous case is the fate of the MV Farah III. The Jordanian cargo vessel was en route from India to South Africa when it encountered engine failure off the east coast of Sri Lanka in December 2006. The crew immediately sent out a distress call and dropped anchor near Mullaitivu ‒ which was then under LTTE control.

Several weeks later, the members of the Sea Tigers took control of the vessel and forced the crew into smaller boats. They were taken ashore and were later delivered to the Red Cross. The drifting ship eventually ran aground and over time was stripped bare by the LTTE. Today, only the frame of the ship remains, and has become a popular tourist attraction in Mullaitivu.

Even after the war, Sri Lanka remained cautious of potential pirate encounters. The controversial Avant Garde Maritime Security Services (AGMSS), for instance, was a private security company that, together with Rakna Arakshaka Lanka Ltd (RALL), provided maritime security against piracy.

Both AGMSS and RALL ran into trouble a few years ago, however, when news of floating armouries were exposed to the public. Although the initial noise surrounding the issue has died down, occasional updates do sometimes make headlines.

The service venture provided to AGMSS and RALL was repealed in 2015 and handed over to the Sri Lanka Navy, who have reportedly made a profit through security operations.

Today, although peg-legged, eye-patched plunderers aboard foreboding ships exist only in works of fiction, piracy itself isn’t entirely a thing of the past. In fact, occasional news reports do continue to surface of Sri Lankans falling victim to pirates, if not closer to home, then in foreign seas.

Featured image courtesy: worldatlas.com

At one point or another, we have all wondered whether we are truly alone in this universe ‒ especially when news reports like this one crop up.

Science may not yet be able to tell us for sure whether or not there are intelligent lifeforms out there, but, like everything else that disrupts everyday life in our country, rumours of alien landings and UFO sightings naturally attract our attention.

Photo of what is believed to be the most recent sighting of a UFO that was seen in Ratnapura, Hambantota, Galle and Matara. No conclusive information was found on the matter, however. Image courtesy: newsfirst.lk

Sri Lanka’s Unidentified Flying Object Research Association, (yes, such a thing exists. Or did, at some point) or SLUFORA, used to be the only established research organisation that looked into reports of UFO sightings and extraterrestrial visitations that supposedly occurred in the island. The Association, which was inaugurated in 1998, was the only group with expertise in ufology ‒ the study of reports, visual records, physical evidence, and other phenomena related to unidentified flying objects (UFOs).

However, the group has since disbanded, leaving behind some of the association’s case files, which were published as a book in 2006.

The first few records of UFO sightings ‒ or ‘close encounters of the first kind’, which, according to the Hynek’s scale in ufology, is an event in which a person witnesses an unidentified flying object ‒ have been reported in Sri Lanka in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Yet, not much information is available practically anywhere, due to a lack of witness reports. The decades following, however, seem to have had some interesting (sometimes spooky) stories to tell.

The first major incident recorded by the SLUFORA occurred in Polonnaruwa, in 1984.

As per the inquiry reports of the SLUFORA, a blue spherical object was seen in the sky at around 12.30 one afternoon, in Mahawewa, Polonnaruwa.

According to accounts of the three children and a school teacher who witnessed the incident, the object had landed adjacent to a nearby school, after which an obscure, humanoid creature had emerged from the object. The experience had reportedly shocked the three students, who had then fled the area.

Going by alleged sightings in Sri Lanka, school children seem to have a knack for spotting unusual phenomena, particularly of the extraterrestrial variety.

The SLUFORA has recorded, in its casefile BAN-CE-II, how, in Bandarawela in 1998, two students aged 8 and 10 witnessed what they described as a large, disc-shaped object emitting red and yellow lights landing in their school grounds after it had hovered several feet in the air.

According to one of the students, the object had a diameter of approximately eight feet and was seven feet in height.

The report further noted that the students had witnessed a similar object hovering in the sky above the school on previous occasions, too. The two students had not approached the UFO, which they claimed had landed, and then hovered for several minutes before taking off. According to the report, however, the object had not made any indentations on the ground where it was supposed to have landed.

Around the same time, others from the area also claimed to have witnessed a similar object streak across the sky and disappear into the horizon.

The SLUFORA concludes the report saying that it was, therefore, unlikely that this phenomenon was fabricated, due to the similarities in different eyewitness accounts.

In January 2000, three residents of Bollaththewa, Kosgama, claimed to have witnessed a glowing ball-like object speeding across the sky. According to the SLUFORA casefile KOS-CE-I, the spherical UFO also reportedly emitted a blinking blue light but had been around 200 feet above ground.

The object had reportedly zigzagged across the night sky several times before disappearing. According to the SLUFORA, three witnesses had observed the object in three separate areas.

The SLUFORA report concludes, however, that the eyewitness reports were contradictory, because the individuals had offered different descriptions, such as on how large the object was, the colour of the light emitted, and the speed at which it travelled.

The most prolific UFO sighting pursued by the SLUFORA was recorded in 2002, when, apparently, a wave of UFO sightings took place over a particular period of time.

According to the SLUFORA casefile POL-CE-II-001, over the course of one month, more than 100 individuals had reported to have witnessed single or multiple UFO sightings in the Polonnaruwa area. And more importantly, various reports that came from all over the Polonnaruwa region possessed eerie similarities, pushing the investigators to conclude that this might not have been a contrived phenomenon.

Eyewitness reports had stated that a large number of glowing spherical objects had been seen hovering in the sky. These objects were always seen in clusters, emitting coloured lights from several feet above the ground. The clusters were reported to have had erratic fly patterns and then speed away after staying air-bourne for several minutes.

The phenomenon attracted the attention of the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON) and the British UFO Research Association (BUFORA), who had deployed investigators in Polonnaruwa to check out the mysterious sightings.