

## **Report on Covid 19 in Sri Lanka upto today**

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The first confirmed case of COVID-19 was reported in Sri Lanka on the 27th January 2020. The victim was a 44-year-old Chinese National from the Hubei Province in China who was visiting Sri Lanka. This Chinese National was found during the passenger's health screening process at the Colombo International Airport done by the instructions of the Ministry of Health in Sri Lanka.

The General Public was advised of the impending epidemic and also educated as to the importance of maintaining social distance, proper hand sanitization and utilization of a facemask to prevent the spread of the virus. Newspapers, TV and other social media outlets were utilized for this purpose with live discussions with the infectious diseases professionals in the country. This gave a clear warning to public ahead of the real epidemic. During this time, 33 Sri Lankan students studying in the Wuhan Province in China were evacuated by Sri Lankan Airlines on first of February 2020 and these 33 passengers were safely quarantined upon arrival at the Colombo International Airport.

Due to the rapid increase of COVID-19 cases in Italy, Iran and South Korea, all passengers coming from those three countries were quarantined for two weeks. A large number of passengers both local and foreign were among them. This quarantine process commenced long before the first Sri Lankan COVID-19 case was reported on the 10th of March 2020. This patient is a local tour guide who had accompanied a group of Italian tourists a week ago. Second Sri Lankan COVID-19 case was detected almost after 40 days from the first case.

Since then there is a significant number of new cases identified. In almost all of these cases, the patients have recently travelled overseas and had returned to Sri Lanka. As a precautionary measure, all those people who had come from Korea, Iran and western countries were taken straight from the Airport to the quarantine centers. The Government appointed a COVID-19 Special Task Force to advise the President to enforce precautionary measures to prevent the spread of the disease. This Task Force comprised of experts from the Ministry of Health, Police and Army. The Army commander was appointed as the Head of the Task Force.

The government decided to close all the Educational Institutes including schools and universities on 17th of March 2020 when the number of confirmed cases, suddenly increased from 18 to 28 on the 16th of March 2020. Most of these COVID-19 confirmed cases were reported from quarantine centers.

There is a significant proportion of Sri Lankans living and working in Italy. Thus, most Sri Lankans living in Italy flew back amid the tightening of global travel restrictions and the fear of living in

Italy which was the then epicenter of this pandemic. During this period, adding to the fear and inconvenience of the quarantined procedures, was the rising social stigma where people who are singled out for quarantine being labelled as ' people spreading the virus'. Thus, many Sri Lankans returning from Italy and other countries conceal trips abroad from authorities in order to evade public quarantine. This often prompts frantic manhunt by the health and law enforcement officials and efforts to trace the people they may have come into contact with. To address the social stigma and hysteria surrounding public quarantine and to educate the general public as to what to expect in these quarantine centers, the government with the help of media have interviewed people in the quarantine centers. The government had also imposed curfew in three districts where COVID-19 cases were reported. As the pandemic rapidly spreads globally, the government decided to lockdown the airport. Thus, passenger flights and those who had come to Sri Lanka irrespective of their country of origin were forced to enter quarantine centers or self-quarantine at home with supervision from the public health inspectors in the area. There are more than 50 quarantine centers established in the country led by the Army, Navy and the Air Force. Many foreign nationals have appreciated the services and facilities provided at these quarantine centers in Sri Lanka in social media,

As a precautionary measure, many hospitals were designated to combat COVID-19 cases in case of escalating numbers, apart from the National Hospital for Infectious Diseases (IDH) which is the main hospital equipped with facilities to combat all infectious diseases in Sri Lanka. As more COVID-19 confirmed cases are discovered in the country, the nationwide curfew is still imposed to bring quarantine evaders and their contacts to quarantine centers and to facilitate social distancing. Every 3-4 day curfew will be lifted in the low-risk districts for 8 hours for the general public to buy necessary groceries and food items. However, this too is strictly monitored by Police and other law enforcement officers to ensure precautionary methods are adhered to (masks and maintaining of social distance). In most areas in the country, mobile services are established to provide people with the necessary food and groceries. For patients who need medicines, mobile pharmacy services had been arranged.

Army, Navy and Air Force together with police had been mobilized to look in to violation of curfew.

In these trying times, the public appreciates the action and precautions taken by the Government to ensure their safety. The public took the advice of the Ministry of Health to wear a mask, maintain social distance and washing hands in public places. During non-curfew periods, all supermarkets, grocery stores, banks are equipped with facilities for hand sanitization and social distancing. Legal action was taken for those who violate government instructions. All religious institutions were asked to cancel all their activities. All public places like museums, zoo, parks, etc were closed indefinitely.

The government decided to give poor people and daily wagers free food rations. Those people who had taken loans for vehicles for transport and other services were exempted from paying instalments until further notice. Those who have taken loans against their salaries are also

exempted from paying their instalments until further notice. Despite all those efforts from the government, COVID-19 confirmed cases have been gradually increasing mainly due to people evading quarantine or willfully refusing to inform authorities of their whereabouts and trace contacts. Currently, Sri Lanka has 162 confirmed COVID-19 cases with 5 deaths.

Sri Lankans appreciate the yeoman service of the health professionals, Army, Navy, Air Force and the police for their commitment and dedication to fight this virus.