

Dear Partners,

Sri Lanka Economic crisis

Today Sri Lanka is facing one of its worst economic crises in recent years. This has resulted in the common people facing several challenges in their day to day lives. This has led to a situation where the rights of the people have been severely violated. Access to basic socio-economic rights have been curtailed, with rights to food, health and wellbeing being threatened. Further, the crackdown on protests and criticism detailed below, amounts to a violation of many fundamental rights including the freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom from torture of the people.

The fuel shortage and the inability of the Sri Lankan government to purchase adequate fuel to meet local demands, has led to long hours of electricity cuts across the country. Certain parts of the country experienced up to 15 hours of electricity cuts during the past week. The sick, the elderly and young children especially have been affected greatly by this, as electricity cuts have also been implemented during the night hours.

Hospitals too have been gravely affected due to this electricity crisis, with certain hospitals informing the public that their ability to treat patients will be severely restricted. A concerning image of surgery being conducted in the dark using torch lights was shared by a nurse on social media, highlighting the gravity of the situation.

Further, shortage of fuel has also led to long queues at fuel stations, as vehicles queue up to pump fuel, especially diesel for which there is severe shortage. This has hampered the ability of the people to commute to work and other places. Further, long queues are also witnessed to obtain kerosene oil, as a considerable percentage of the local population depend on kerosene for household purposes such as cooking and lighting.

The fuel shortage coupled with the restrictions on imports has also led to several stores, especially small and medium enterprises to close shop. Offices are also struggling to keep open due to prevailing electricity cuts and lack of diesel to keep generators running. The NCEASL too is compelled to make a decision in the coming week as to whether the office can remain open depending on the availability of diesel to run the generators.

The fuel shortage and import restrictions along with the drastic depreciation of the Sri Lanka Rupee, has led to shortage of goods and a sharp increase in prices of basic commodities. As a

result there is a shortage of food and cooking gas, with long queues outside shops selling cooking gas cylinders. Incidents of elderly persons fainting, and even falling down dead, have been reported, whilst there have also been reports of a few persons who have committed suicide out of desperation and the inability to support their families. Similarly, there has also been a shortage of medicines due to restrictions on imports and shortage of foreign reserves to purchase medicines, leading to much anxiety and panic.

Despite several calls by both the common people and economic experts to seek help from the IMF and adopt relevant economic policies, till recently, the government refused to pay heed to these requests, thus plunging the country further into turmoil.

People's response

Over the last two weeks, small groups of people began protesting, calling for the President and government to step down and for adequate measures to be adopted in response to the economic crisis. The protests culminated in a large people led protest on 31st March 2022 outside the President's residence. As the protest grew, security forces were deployed to disperse the protestors, using tear gas and water cannons. A military bus was purportedly set on fire, with protestors claiming that this was not done by the protestors but by an outsider intending to create a disturbance.

Several of the protestors were arrested, with the government threatening to use the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act against the protestors. However, this was not pursued, and the protestors were charged under Section 120 of the Penal Code of Sri Lanka, on the alleged grounds of inciting disaffection against the state. Some of the protestors and journalists covering the incident were also subject to police brutality and hospitalized. Approximately 300 lawyers appeared in Courts till late in the night on 1st April 2022 on behalf of the protestors.

State's response

On the night of 1st April 2022, the President issued an extraordinary gazette declaring a state of emergency, whilst curfew was imposed in the protest area. A further curfew was imposed from 6 pm on 2nd April till 6 am on 4th April, which drew widespread criticism, including from the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka. This was followed by a social media ban on 3rd April 2022 for several hours. It is widely believed that the state of emergency and the curfew were implemented in order to curb a large public protest scheduled for 3rd April. Amidst

widespread opposition to the state of emergency and curfew, protestors gathered in small groups across the country throughout the day in breach of curfew regulations.

However the government has failed in its attempts to curtail the fundamental rights to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. A large scale protest is currently underway at the Galle Face, Colombo since 9th April 2022, termed 'Occupy Galle Face' along with several other protests island-wide demanding for the resignation of the President and the current government and for a solution to the ongoing economic crisis.

As of 4th April 2022, the Cabinet and the Governor of the Central Bank tendered their resignations and on 18th April 2022, 21 State Ministers were sworn in. This has not however appeased the public, as the new ministers are also from the current government, and as both the President and Prime Minister continue to hold office.

Judicial response

- The Supreme Court granted leave to proceed for four petitions challenging the legality of the proclamation of the state of emergency, the curfew order issued on 2nd April and the temporary restriction of access to social media platforms. The petitions have been fixed for argument on 15th July 2022.
- An order was issued by the Colombo Magistrate Court preventing Central Bank Governor Nivard Cabraal from leaving the country. The overseas travel ban was extended until 2nd May and the court ordered him to appear before the Court on 2nd May 2022.

Prayer points

- Pray for the leaders of the country, particularly the President and Prime Minister, that they will act with humility and wisdom, and place country before self during this crucial time
- Pray for the security forces and law enforcement officials that they do not resort to brutality and violence in suppressing public protests
- Pray for the judiciary that it will act with independence and integrity during these times and hold leaders accountable for their actions
- Pray for the people of Sri Lanka that they will exercise their freedom of expression with responsibility and constructively, whilst not resorting to violence

- Pray for God's will to be done as political changes take place, that smooth transition and responsible governance will be facilitated

More details of the events unfolding in the country can also be found at:

<https://groundviews.org/2022/04/02/march-31st-protests-updates/>

https://www.dailymirror.lk/print/front_page/SC-nods-for-petitions-challenging-Proclamation-of-State-of-Emergency/238-234763

<https://www.themorning.lk/cabraals-travel-ban-extended-to-early-may/>

<https://economynext.com/protests-intensify-in-sri-lanka-after-record-fuel-price-hike-93156/>