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**President Gotabaya Rajapaksa discusses revitalizing economy while containing the COVID-19 crisis with Principal Advisor to President Mr. Lalith Weeratunga**

Auyobowan Your Excellency! I wish you health and prosperity this New Year as I welcome you to this forum.

I also wish all Sri Lankans a New Year with Health and Happiness.

Today, due to the COVID-19 crisis our day to day lives are severely affected as never before. Our private and our social lives, including our livelihoods are being affected by this pandemic.

This is not a situation unique to our country. This crisis has engulfed countries from South Asia to Far East as well as the West. The situation in our neighboring countries is not at all good.

This evening you are joining us His Excellency as the Head of the State, the Executive, Supreme Commander of the Tri-Forces and Head of the Cabinet to explain to our citizens how we, as a country, are dealing with this crisis.

**Question 01:**

First of all Your Excellency, are you satisfied with the course of action the State had taken over the past few months to suppress COVID-19 virus from spreading?

As you have a good understanding of the progress of this course of action, I would appreciate an analysis from you on this regard.

**Answer:**

From the laborer in the health sector's lowest rank to Public Health Inspectors, nurses, specialist doctors and other officers have rendered a huge service to control this virus. The Tri-Forces, Police, Intelligence units too are contributing tirelessly to these efforts.

At the same time, it has been the commitment of the public servants including secretaries to ministries, District and Divisional Secretaries that have ensured an uninterrupted continuation of essential services.

Today, the reason we have managed to keep the situation under control is because of this difficult undertaking by all these personalities. I must also thank our citizens for bearing up with these difficult times.

The first case of the Coronavirus or COVID-19 was reported from Wuhan in China in December 2019. The Chinese Government understood the seriousness of this virus by mid-January and warned the world about it.

This presented us with the challenge of bringing back 34 Sri Lankans studying in Wuhan and their immediate families. We then sent a special flight to China on February 01 to bring them back. As soon as they landed, they were subject to a carefully organized quarantine program in the Diyatalawa Army Camp. Thereby, we ensured that this virus did not enter our country.

I, as the President of this country and my Administration understood the danger of this epidemic early on and took decisive steps to control it. On January 26th itself, under my leadership as the President, the National Task Force was established bringing the Health Ministry, Tri-Forces, Police, Intelligence and other related disciplines together. Their primary task was to advise the Government on the steps to control the epidemic.

On January 27, the first COVID-19 patient was identified from Sri Lanka. She was a Chinese tourist.

Even at that time we observed that this virus had already spread to countries like Iran and South Korea where a large number of Sri Lankans were working. As many Sri Lankans were returning from these countries, there was a danger of this virus entering the country through them.

Accordingly, we decided on February 10 that it is imperative for those arriving from Italy, South Korea and Iran to be quarantined in a quarantine center.

On February 16, we decided that everyone who arrives in Sri Lanka must be quarantined. On March 12, we closed every school, university and education center for vacations for if one child got infected, it can easily spread among the other children.

While the schools and universities were physically closed, we established a separate Task Force to facilitate distance learning.

By March 18, we have decided to ban all arrivals from Airports. However, the Administration sympathized with the 900 pilgrims who got stranded in India. Thus, a special flight was sent to bring them back home. They were also sent to a quarantine center. The first "work from home" week for public servants was declared on March 20 to March 27. The reason for this was the All Island curfew that was imposed on March 20.

The Chinese lady who was found infected with the virus on January 27 made a complete recovery and left for China on February 19. Thereafter, the next patient, the first Sri Lankan was identified on March 11. He was admitted to the IDH. Since then, almost every day new patients were identified. Out of them, 38 were those who had come from abroad and were already in quarantine centers.

Since then, another 79 from quarantine centers had been tested positive for COVID-19. We also found another 139 outside quarantine centers, who had got infected in various ways.

## **Question 02:**

Your Excellency, you have a very comprehensive knowledge about the State machinery. You just explained with the timeline the steps taken to contain this crisis. It is clear to us that the Administration has tackled this issue with awareness. I would like to ask you what are the steps the Government takes when a person tests positive for COVID-19.

## **Answer:**

I receive a large number of data daily. I take my decisions upon them. Chief of Intelligence plays a major role in this process together with me.

Since we had a proper mechanism from the beginning to control the spread of the virus, we have all the information about infected people. We can identify early how he was infected, what are the places he visited, who he associated with as well as who are vulnerable to be infected. This way we can send them for quarantine on time.

Discovering patients outside quarantine centers later shows that infected people had arrived in Sri Lanka even before this process begun. Also, people had come from countries such as Indonesia. We have been able to identify them only after they had come to hospitals with symptoms. If someone shows signs of Corona we send that person to IDH hospital and conduct PCR examination.

Once we identify a patient, we send his family members, people who he associated with and people in the areas where he visited for quarantine.

We examine all the information about the person such as how he was infected, from whom was infected. This method is called Contact Tracing. After identifying the infected will be sent to a hospital. People who he had associated will be separated from the rest and send to quarantine centers. Those who had distance relationship with the infected will be subjected to self-quarantine. Public Health Officers and the Police visit these people at their homes.

If there is a threat that a large number of people to be infected we will have to isolate the area they live in. Most cases currently being reported are from these kinds of groups. We have been able to minimize the community transmission of the disease. This is due to the fact that we identify the infected earlier and direct for quarantine process.

I have read some articles which stated that Sri Lanka was successful in controlling the spread with the method of contact tracing with the support of Intelligence Services.

### **Question 03:**

Your Excellency, you explained in detail to the country what are the measures taken at the initial stage, their results and you are satisfied with the way these steps are been implemented.

Your Excellency, although the social distancing prevented people getting infected with this deadly disease, there is a notion in the society that people have to face numerous hardships due to ongoing curfew.

We had seen how people gathered in large flocks to purchase essential food items and medicine when the curfew was lifted. We witness how you were moved by this. How do you see this situation?

### **Answer:**

We all aware that current curfew has an impact on the day-to-day life. But we as a nation have to combat against an invisible enemy.

We knew that people will face with the issue of storing food once the curfew is imposed. Hence, the Government took several people-friendly decisions. Especially, we took measures to reduce the price of dhal and tinned fish, two very common food items in the country. We knew beforehand that imposing curfew was imminent.

The Government took every possible measure to ensure the continuation of several sectors such as agriculture which has a direct impact to the life of the people. We have granted permission to the farmers in Ampara, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and other areas to continue their agricultural activities.

We know many daily wage earners and self-employed people have been badly hit. That is why the Government took measures to grant Rs. 5000 to them.

We set up a task force under Mr. Basil Rajapaksa to look into the matters of the people during the curfew period and provide solutions to them. Government took several measures to ensure maintaining normalcy in civilian life. Salaries were paid on time. Loan installments were suspended. Pensioners were paid on time.

People were also exempted from payment of loan installments. The daily wage-earners were given many facilities. Entire country is aware of these steps.

Furthermore, those who earn a daily income as three-wheeler drivers, school van drivers and bus drivers were provided with concessions on payment of lease. We have also provided assistance to private companies that were unable to pay wages to their employees. Such benefits were given to the people who were faced with economic difficulties.

It is true that there were some difficulties. We are carrying out these tasks amidst those difficulties. Hence, I appeal not to make use of those difficulties in order to achieve some other objectives.

Although, there are criticisms against the Public service, I believe we have been able to provide these services because of the ability of the State sector.

#### **Question 04:**

Now Your Excellency will have to take a fresh look at the economy. When you presented the 'Saubhagyaye Dekma' (Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour), your economic strategies were outlined in it. If we had continued to work on those strategies, we could have reached some place. Now, we have to think again about new strategies. The entire country waiting to see what the government led by the President would do now. This is an issue affecting our people. Could you explain your new vision?

#### **Answer:**

Several spheres of our economy have been badly hit. Now, after a period of one month, we have to think as to how the economy could be revived. The areas such as tourism, small and medium industries, apparel industry and others that earned foreign exchange have faced severe setbacks due to corona virus. This is a good opportunity for us to change economic strategy and direct it towards indigenous economy. In the past we have imported even the goods that could be locally produced. Now we can not only be self-sufficient in agriculture, we can also export our agricultural products to other countries.

When the economies of all the countries collapse, our economy too will collapse. Even if we bring our economy to a satisfactory level through systematic measures, we will still face difficulties unless the global economy becomes normal.

Let us take the tourism sector as an example. We especially welcome many European tourists, but now we do not know when they will be able to come. This is a good opportunity for us to think new and see what are the countries that would recover first from this crisis. We have to think as to how we could attract tourists from those countries to visit us.

Similarly, we may have to seek new markets for our exports. This is also a good opportunity to produce the protecting clothing required in the health sector.

Information technology is a sector that would continue unhindered. That is also a sector that could treble our export income while generating employment in the country.

Food security is of immense importance. Entire world is keen to achieve food security. This is a good opportunity for us not only to be self-sufficient in food, but also export food items.

Then, there is the issue of increasing the income of farmers. This is a good opportunity for that. One is to introduce new technology to farmers. This is a god chance for us to introduce latest agricultural technology to farmers and improve this sector. We can bring new technology and encourage the youths to farming sector and develop agriculture based industries. This is a good opportunity to build indigenous economy.

This is a break to start farming every day. The public sector entities have large extents of state land. These companies are making losses. They must become profit-making ventures.

There are also loss-making tea estates. We must ensure that these would become profit making companies. We must make them efficient. They must grow in every unused cultivable land. They must also grow new crops under the traditional crops.

We must be happy about the history of our Tea Board. It has, for the first time in history, conducted an online tea auction using modern technology. These types of indigenous economic models we have. We must change our strategies. We must seek new markets and develop them.

#### **Question 5:**

No foreign flights come now. The airport has been closed. There are many Sri Lankans living in countries like India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Australia, England and Belarus waiting to come to Sri Lanka. What are the steps that could be taken regarding them?

#### **Answer:**

There is a plan for that. It has been prepared taking into consideration the priorities of those who want to come back to the country. First priority is to get the students. A plan has been set in motion. They will have to undergo PCR test at the airport.

After the PCR test, they will be sent to quarantine centers. Measures have been taken to ensure that nobody would get infected or infect others. However, we can bring only a limited number in a day. We have examined and prioritized them. We have already sought permission from those countries, because their airports have also been closed. We have asked for our aircrafts to land and once the permission is granted we bring them to the country.

#### **Question 6:**

You have always expressed interest in preventing the economy from collapsing and bringing back normalcy to public life. What the steps you implement for these?

#### **Answer:**

We have always taken into consideration the impact on the economy and the people when curfew has been imposed to keep the people indoors. We have discussed with economic experts, senior officials of the Central Bank, industrialists and leading businessmen with sound knowledge on economy and took these decisions. We have considered the requirement to contain the virus and the requirements when the country is opened again and balanced them in accordance with the situation and took these decisions.

We examined the areas in which the patients were detected. We did not lift the curfew in Puttalam, Gampaha, Colombo and Kaluthara. In certain areas we tried to limit the closure to police divisions. But in certain areas, it could not be limited to police divisions. We have imposed curfew in entire districts to cover those affected areas. In some districts there is not a single patient. In some districts there are one or two. They too have been infected during their visits abroad. We can easily open those districts. That is why we decided to lift curfew in certain districts. We took this decision in order to give an opportunity to open the industries. This was also done to ensure transport of local agricultural products.

The public sector has been close down for one month. The public sector has a big responsibility of providing services to the public. We have lifted curfew, not for the people to travel unnecessarily. We can get the maximum benefit from the steps taken by the government, health authorities and the police, if the people act with responsibility. We have seen in media about the instances of curfew violations by some people. Some people have been detained. Vehicles have been confiscated. I urge with responsibility to adhere to the

instructions given by the health authorities. The threat of virus is not over. We have managed and controlled it. But we need the support of the people to continue this process.

### **Question 7:**

Your Excellency, so far we have discussed about the steps taken to control the spread of corona virus, results thereof, the affect of the virus on the public and the economy and the short term remedial measures. Some people ask why this cannot be delayed further.

### **Answer:**

The Western Prince contributes more than 50% to our economy. The economic experts are of the view that if we delay this further, the economy will face a massive problem. The daily wage earners in the society have been very badly affected. Hence, we decided to take this measure. I would like to extend the closure for another month, if possible. But we had to take a grave decision. What will happen if a country is completely closed for a month?

If there are certain doubts about the opening up this time, the people will be able to remove those doubts. Why did we impose curfew? It was to ensure social distancing. If the people take the responsibility and adhere to these regulations, we will not have to face any problems. Now the police and tri- forces have been deployed in Colombo district to control this situation. Earlier they were spread across the country. But I instructed the Defence Secretary to ensure that the situation remain under control as it was during the war and ensure that that people would not make unnecessary visits and act in a disciplined manner.

### **Question - 08**

Your Excellency, there is another important issue for the people as well as this epidemic situation. When considering long term aspect, there should be a stable government. The Election Commission states that although the Parliamentary polls scheduled to be held on April 25<sup>th</sup> with the aim of successful completion of all these initiatives, it will not be possible to hold the elections at the scheduled day. What is your point of view in this regard?

### **Answer**

I won the Presidential Election held on November 16, 2019 with a very clear mandate of 69 lakh votes. I have presented a manifesto called 'Rata Hadana Saubhagyaye Dekma' to the people. The majority of the people in this country have democratically elected their President to implement that manifesto. Even though the people had approved my vision for the country, I had to work with the Parliament elected in August 2015. That Parliament did not represent the present public opinion. Since there was no majority in Parliament, I had to form a minority government. When I took office as President, there was no budget passed for the year 2020. The previous government was ruling the country through a Vote on Account. At that time, the country was already facing a major economic crisis.

A new budget or else an interim budget were needed to implement my policies as people expected. As we promised, to allocate more funds to develop the fields of education, technology and agriculture, to generate new employment opportunities, to rebuild the collapsed economy, the government needs to possess the ability of handling finance.

This is why I decided to dissolve the Parliament on March 2, at the first time I got the opportunity to do so according to the powers vested on me by the constitution, and to hold an election on April 25 and to call the new Parliament on May 14 with the aim of depicting the true public opinion. Accordingly, the Election Commission was vested with the complete freedom and power necessary to conduct an independent election. The foremost obligation and duty of the Election Commission is to ensure the supremacy of the people by holding elections at the right time while respecting the democratic right of the people to elect their representatives by a vote.

But all of you know that the Election Commission has taken steps to postpone the election indefinitely in view of the current epidemic situation.

According to the Constitution, the new Parliament should meet within three months after the dissolution of the Parliament. Consequently, the last date for the new Parliament to be convened is June 02. It is the independent Election Commission that has to decided the date on which the elections will be held. The independent Election Commission has the right to hold the election appropriately under the present circumstances. If they want, they can take several days for the election.

The Election Commission has wide powers regarding holding elections under the current constitution.

I am not ready to pressure the independent Election Commission to hold or postpone elections.

I have done everything so far constitutionally and have announced the date for the new Parliament to be convened. Unless a new Parliament is elected by June 2, I will not be able to summon it. It has to be done on a future date. Nevertheless, under whatever reason I will not be able recall the old Parliament. I don't even have a legal right to do that.

To date, my government has taken all the necessary steps to curb the coronavirus. A number of groups including all the major parties in the country have submitted their nominations correctly for the election. Therefore, the responsibility of holding the elections is now with the independent Election Commission. The government has given them all the legislative support they needed in this regard. I am ready to call the new Parliament once the election is over and MPs are elected.

### **Question - 09**

Your Excellency, at the moment, various opposition groups are issuing statements stating that there is no environment to hold the elections and the Parliamentary elections should be further postponed. They do not even state when it should be held. What is your opinion on this?

### **Answer**

Today, the People have the opportunity to understand the disguised motives of those who dream that the country could be taken into a constitutional crisis by continuous calling for the postponement of the election. I remind everyone at this point that there is no special legal issue as to what the country needs and how it can be done and it is constitutionally very clear what should be done and who has the ultimate responsibility.

I hope to fulfill the promises made to the people by implementing policies included in the 'Rata Hadana Saubhagyaye Dekma' while successfully facing the threat of corona virus which has brought the whole world to its knees. I expect from all of you, who love the country, to render your valuable support necessary in this regard.

















