

Sri Lanka's Militarisation of COVID-19 Response

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/EINPresswire.com/ -- Accompanying Infographic

Johannesburg: The lack of civilian oversight over Sri Lanka's militarised COVID-19 response raises some very serious human rights concerns, said the International Truth and Justice Project.

“Sri Lanka has an alleged war criminal heading its COVID-19 response, who served in the same army regiment as the President, raising questions about transparency, accountability and oversight,” said the ITJP’s Executive Director, Yasmin Sooka, herself under lockdown.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Killings, Agnes Callamard, has said that any measures taken to deal with the COVID-19 emergency should be guided by the principles of legality, proportion, precaution and non-discrimination. Appointing military personnel to manage the crisis without any civilian oversight does not bode well for Sri Lanka – nor does Lt. Gen. Shavendra Silva specifically identifying those COVID-19 patients who are Muslims in public statements.

“Experienced professionals from the civil service should be in charge of coordinating complex public health and distribution issues, not the Army,” said Yasmin Sooka, “People’s lives are at stake as well as huge amounts of money and supplies that need to be equitably shared. It is essential that the public be allowed to question the response operation without being threatened with arrest. This crisis shouldn’t become an excuse to erode civil liberties yet further.”

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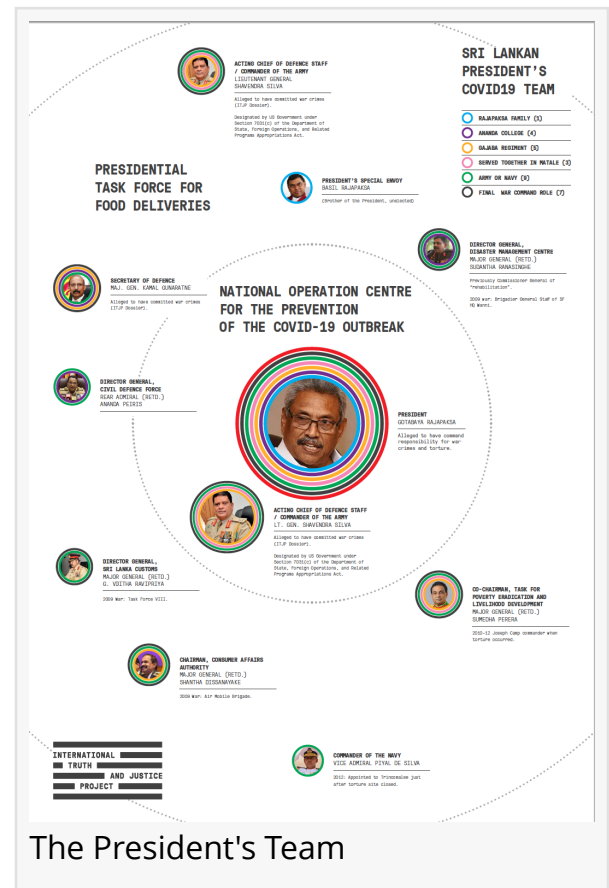
Yasmin Sooka

Already there are clashes between medical professionals and the military over what the best public health measures should be. Even the Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) has expressed disappointment that the Government placed an Army commander in charge of the country's overall COVID-19 Response.

The National Operation Center for Prevention of COVID-19
Outbreak

The Sri Lankan Government says all prevention and

management of the COVID-19 virus outbreak and healthcare provisions and other public services are to be managed by this newly formed National Operation Centre. All other



The President's Team

government officials should be available for the Centre to deploy .

However the National Operation Centre is headed by Sri Lanka's Army Commander who is also acting Chief of Defence Staff, Lt. Gen. Shavendra Silva. Silva was publicly designated this year by the US State Department because of credible information of his involvement, through command responsibility, in gross violations of human rights, namely extrajudicial killings . Silva was appointed to this powerful COVID-19 role by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who was his superior officer in the first battalion of the Gajaba Regiment in Matale during military operations to crush the second Sinhala youth insurgency in 1989 when hundreds disappeared in the area under their control. In 2008-9 when the US Government says Silva was allegedly involved in war crimes, he was receiving orders allegedly directly from Gotabaya Rajapaksa who was then secretary of defence.

Moreover the legal basis for this latest appointment is unclear as there is no gazette notification establishing the COVID-19 National Operation Centre, as for other COVID-19 entities . This raises the question of who in the civilian administration holds Shavendra Silva accountable, other than his friend the President who is himself ex military. Media conferences on the outbreak are dominated by Shavendra Silva who briefs on the quarantine situation .

Presidential Task Force On Food Supplies

This was gazetted by the President in March to ensure the supply of food to the nation during the crisis. In a detailed analysis the Centre for Policy Alternatives commented that "the mandate and powers assigned to the Task Force are much wider in scope and range from ensuring the supply of essential goods and services to providing relief measures to vulnerable groups of society" . The Task Force is also headed by the President's unelected brother Basil Rajapaksa and contains a large number of retired military officials close to the President (including from his Gajaba Regiment) also implicated in the 2009 war in Sri Lanka, which saw widespread violations of international law by the Army.

The appointment of military officers to key public roles has been controversial – for example Major General Vijitha Ravipriya's appointment as Director General of Customs was opposed by the customs trades unions who said this job should not go to a retired army officer with no experience of civil administration but to a civil servant from their own department . The President's secretary, P. B. Jayasundera, alleged the reason for appointing a military officer was to curb corruption. Shockingly, in 2008 Jayasundera himself, had to step down as Treasury Secretary over allegations that he was responsible for the unlawful sale of a revenue-producing public asset at an artificially low price to a private corporation but a year later was reinstated by then President, Mahinda Rajapaksa, brother of the current President .

In addition, the Chairman of the Consumer Affairs Authority is Major General (Retired) D.M.S. Dissanayaka (Shantha Dissanayake), also from the President's Gajaba Regiment, was caught on camera recently threatening a vendor profiteering during the COVID19 disaster, saying "I will pulverise your ears" . Moreover, the Committee of Inquiry into the Prison Incident Welikada in 2012 recommended charging Dissanayake under Section 162 of the Sri Lankan Penal Code for his alleged involvement in the Welikada Jail massacre in which 27 prisoners were killed, along with Gotabaya Rajapaksa . Neither was charged.

COVID19 Healthcare and Social Security Fund

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa established this Fund on 23 March to collect direct deposits and donations from organisations and individual donors . On 7 April, the fund stood at SL. Rs. 420m (US \$ 2.2m).The President's website says more details can be obtained from Mr. K.B. Egodawela, Director General Administration. Egodawela is a retired military officer and previously a co-accused in the Avant Garde corruption case with President Gotabaya Rajapaksa but released from the charges two months ago, after he had already been appointed the President's Chief of Staff .

Calls for Civilian Oversight

Twenty leading trade unions representing the public sector workforce recently wrote to the President calling on him to bring COVID-19 prevention under a civil authority. In a joint statement on 18 March they said:

for more see https://itjpsl.com/assets/press/English-ITJP_COVID-19-press-release-Merged-copy.pdf

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