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# Responses to Information Requests

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7 May 2021

### LKA200596.E

Sri Lanka: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, including on detention conditions, access to justice and socio-economic conditions in major cities (2019–May 2021)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

## 1. Overview

According to sources, Sri Lanka's first case of COVID-19, a tourist from China, was confirmed on 27 January 2020 (AP 27 Jan. 2020; Reuters 27 Jan. 2020). Sources indicate that the first domestic case of COVID-19 was reported in March 2020 (Wickramasinghe 1 Feb. 2021, 2; World Bank 9 Apr. 2021, 9).

The World Bank estimates that in 2019 Sri Lanka's population was 21,803,000 (World Bank 2019). According to the COVID-19 dashboard of Sri Lanka's Health Promotion Bureau, as of 3 May 2021, there have been 111,753 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 696 deaths related to COVID-19 (Sri Lanka 3 May 2021). The WHO reports that, as of 21 April 2021, 927,711 COVID-19 vaccine doses have been administered in Sri Lanka (UN 3 May 2021).

A March 2020 Al Jazeera article notes that in March 2020 Sri Lanka's government closed all international commercial flights into Sri Lanka "until at least" 25 March 2020, introduced a mandatory 14-day quarantine for individuals returning to Sri Lanka from a country "where large-scale COVID-19 outbreak has been detected," and imposed a "strictly enforce[ed]" curfew (Al Jazeera 23 Mar. 2020). According to an April 2021 World Bank report on economic development and the economic impact of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka, in March 2020, Sri Lanka's government adopted measures to contain COVID-19 including the suspension of the arrival of tourists; a curfew, which was in effect from mid-March 2020 through June 2020; contact tracing; quarantine; and isolation (World Bank 9 Apr. 2021, 9). The same source notes that a nationwide lockdown, which resulted in a "near-total restrictions to movement," was in place between 20 March and 16 April 2020 (World Bank 9 Apr. 2021, 23) and also states that tourism was brought to a "standstill" due to the closure of airports from April to December 2020 (World Bank 9 Apr. 2021, 11).

For further information on the government's response to COVID-19, see Response to Information Request LKA200592 of April 2021.

## 2. Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19

The World Bank report states that "Sri Lanka's economy contracted by 3.6 percent in 2020, the worst growth performance on record" (World Bank 9 Apr. 2021, 6). An April 2021 Asian Development Bank (ADB) [1] fact sheet on Sri Lanka states that COVID-19 and its related restrictions "impacted most major sectors" of Sri Lanka's economy (ADB Apr. 2021, 1). The same source notes that the Easter Sunday attacks [2] in 2019 had already had a "significant" impact on Sri Lanka's economic growth, particularly the tourism industry (ADB Apr. 2021, 1). A February 2021 article by Nira Wickramasinghe, a professor and chair of modern South Asian studies at Leiden University in the Netherlands, published in the journal *Asian Survey* [3], observes that the closure of Sri Lanka's borders affected "all industries associated with tourism" (Wickramasinghe 1 Feb. 2021, 211, 214). The same source notes that remittances from overseas workers were also "severely" affected because "thousands" of Sri Lankan migrant workers lost their employment due to COVID-19 (Wickramasinghe 1 Feb. 2021, 214).

According to the fourth quarter labour force survey conducted by Sri Lanka's Department of Census and Statistics, covering October, November, and December 2020, there were 8,031,233 total employed individuals in the fourth quarter of 2020, compared to 8,180,693 in 2019 and 8,015,166 in 2018 (Sri Lanka 2020, 4). The same source indicates that the unemployment rate was 5.2 percent in the fourth quarter of 2020, compared to 4.8 percent in 2019 and 4.4 percent in 2018 (Sri Lanka 2020, 4). The labour force survey reports that the unemployment rate for men was 4.1 percent in the fourth quarter of 2020, compared to

3.3 percent in 2019 and 3.0 percent in 2018; the unemployment rate for women was 7.5 percent in the fourth quarter of 2020, compared to 7.4 percent in 2019 and 7.1 percent in 2018 (Sri Lanka 2020, 4). The same survey notes that the youth (individuals aged 15 to 24) unemployment rate was 25.7 percent (Sri Lanka 2020, 3). The labour force survey notes that the youth unemployment rate was the "highest reported" unemployment rate compared to other age groups (Sri Lanka 2020, 3). The same source indicates that the youth unemployment rate for men was 22.2 percent and the youth unemployment rate for women was 33.3 percent (Sri Lanka 2020, 3).

The labour force survey observes that "the unemployment [rate] among females is higher than males, in all age groups" (Sri Lanka 2020, 3). A February 2021 article by the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) notes that the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 has been "severe" for women in Sri Lanka because many women "have insecure and often low paid informal jobs" (UN 26 Feb. 2021).

The World Bank report notes that measures taken by Sri Lanka's government to control the first wave of COVID-19 affected the tourism, construction, and transport sectors, and falling international demand affected the textile industry (World Bank 9 Apr. 2021, 6). The same source reports that construction and textile manufacturing "suffered the largest shocks" and that overall, there was a 6.9 percent reduction in industrial activity in 2020 (World Bank 9 Apr. 2021, 11). The World Bank report indicates that the "weak" performance in transportation, tourism, and personal services due to COVID-19 mobility restrictions led to a 1.5 percent decrease in service sector activity (World Bank 9 Apr. 2021, 11). According to the same source, there was a 2.4 percent reduction in agricultural production because of supply chain interruptions (World Bank 9 Apr. 2021, 11). The labour force survey reports that out of the 8,031,233 employed individuals in the fourth quarter of 2020, 44.8 percent were employed in the service sector, 29 percent in the agricultural sector, and 26.2 percent in the industrial sector (Sri Lanka 2020, 4).

The World Bank report notes that COVID-19 "has dealt a significant shock to the economy and has reversed past progress in poverty reduction" (World Bank 9 Apr. 2021, 23). The same source indicates that COVID-19 "led to an increase in poverty through deteriorations in labor market outcomes" (World Bank 9 Apr. 2021, 11). According to the World Bank report, sectors, including construction, transportation, manufacturing, food, and accommodation, which were responsible for "the majority of new jobs in recent years," have been "particularly" affected (World Bank 9 Apr. 2021, 23). The same source notes that employees in the industrial sector were more affected than employees in the agricultural and service sectors (World Bank 9 Apr. 2021, 11). The World Bank report notes that Sri Lanka's "government implemented several livelihood support programs" and that "mitigation measures were initiated through existing welfare schemes" (World Bank 9 Apr. 2021, 28).

### 3. COVID-19 and Socio-Economic Conditions in Colombo

Information on the impact of COVID-19 on socio-economic conditions in Colombo could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

### 4. COVID-19 and Detention Conditions

A December 2020 report by the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) [4] on prisons, based on inspections, interviews, and questionnaires conducted in twenty prisons across Sri Lanka, notes that "prisons are severely overcrowded and hold a large number of pretrial detainees" and that the impact of prison overcrowding includes "lack of access to healthcare, higher rate[s] of illnesses, poor provision of rehabilitation programmes, psycho-social support and problems related to maintaining order due to inadequate prison officers" (Sri Lanka 3 Dec. 2020, iii, 1). A June 2020 report by the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) [5] on issues regarding imprisonment in Sri Lanka indicates that there is "[s]evere overcrowding" in prisons and that prisons "lack the most basic sanitary facilities with severe shortages of washrooms" (CPA June 2020, 32). The same source notes that "[s]ystemic issues within prisons in Sri Lanka expose inmates and staff to heightened risks due to both the contagiousness of the virus as well as the restrictions put in place to contain its spread within the country" (CPA June 2020, 7). A July 2020 article by the UNDP reports that "over" 60,000 people were arrested for curfew violations from March to June 2020 and that "[c]urfew[-]related arrests added to already overcrowded prisons that operate at two and half times their capacity compromis[es] COVID-19 related health and safety imperatives" (UN 15 July 2020). A December 2020 article by the *Hindu*, an Indian newspaper, notes that prisons in Sri Lanka currently hold "over" 30,000 prisoners at "more than" three times their capacity (*The Hindu* 10 Dec. 2020). Similarly, a December 2020 Associated Press (AP) article states that "Sri Lankan prisons are highly congested with more than 32,000 inmates crowded into facilities with a capacity of 11,000" (AP 1 Dec. 2020). The *Hindu* article reports that the Commissioner General of Prisons stated, in a July 2020 interview, that "prisons 'in and around Colombo and other major cities' were operating at nearly '400% capacity'" (*The Hindu* 10 Dec. 2020).

A November 2020 article by News First, a Sri Lankan news website (News First n.d.), reports that according to the State Minister of Prison Reforms and Prisoners' Rehabilitation, 1.5 percent of the total prison population had been exposed to COVID-19 and 438 cases of COVID-19 were reported in Sri Lankan prisons, including 12 cases among prison officers (News First 17 Nov. 2020). Sources report that "[m]ore than" (AP 1 Dec. 2020) or "[a]round" (BBC 30 Nov. 2020) 1,000 cases of COVID-19 have been reported in prisons (AP 1 Dec. 2020; BBC 30 Nov. 2020). The *Hindu* article indicates that according to officials, as of 10 December 2020, 2,643 prisoners and 94 prison staff had tested positive for COVID-19 (*The*

*Hindu* 10 Dec. 2020). The *Morning*, a Sri Lankan newspaper (*The Morning* n.d.), reports that as of 25 January 2021, there were 4,395 cases of COVID-19 among prisoners in Sri Lanka (*The Morning* 25 Jan. 2021).

Sources report that, in March 2020, a "riot" (AP 22 Mar. 2020; Satkunanathan 3 Apr. 2020) or a "protest related to COVID-19" (Amnesty International 30 Nov. 2020) at Anuradhapura Prison in North Central Province resulted in the death of two inmates and the injuries of [six (AP 22 Mar. 2020; Sakunanathan 3 Apr. 2020)] others (AP 22 Mar. 2020; Satkunanathan 3 Apr. 2020; Amnesty International 30 Nov. 2020). A March 2020 AP article reports that inmates at Anuradhapura Prison "scuffled with guards and some tried to escape" during a protest and quotes the President of the Committee for Protecting Rights of Prisoners (CPRP) [6] as stating that "inmates were protesting congested conditions and the poor quality of meals" following a two-week ban on visitors, who "often" bring home-cooked meals (AP 22 Mar. 2020).

According to sources, eleven inmates were killed and "more than" 100 were injured when guards fired shots due to unrest at Mahara prison in Western Province in November 2020 (AP 1 Dec. 2020; Fernando 11 Dec. 2020). A November 2020 BBC article reports that inmates at Mahara prison "had launched protests amid a surge of coronavirus infections in the prisons, demanding early release on bail and better facilities" (BBC 30 Nov. 2020). A December 2020 article by the Press Trust of India (PTI), an Indian news agency, indicates that an interim report of a five-member panel investigating the Mahara prison riot stated that the protest was caused by COVID-19 concerns (PTI 12 Dec. 2020). The same source notes that inmates were concerned about "a large number" of COVID-19 patients being held at the prison and that "they were justified [in] raising concerns over their health and safety" (PTI 12 Dec. 2020).

The December 2020 AP article notes that "[p]andemic-related unrest has been growing in Sri Lanka's overcrowded prisons" and that inmates at "several" prisons staged protests as the number of COVID-19 cases increased (AP 1 Dec. 2020). An Amnesty International article published in late November 2020 reports that the incident at Mahara Prison was the third time since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic that "lethal force" has been used against inmates in Sri Lanka (Amnesty International 30 Nov. 2020). Sources indicates that in December 2020, after the riot at Mahara prison, amnesty was granted to 637 convicts (AFP 1 Dec. 2020) or 607 prisoners (DW 1 Dec. 2020). A January 2021 News First article reports that according to Sri Lanka's Department of Prisons, 12,329 prisoners and "suspects" have been released since 1 December [2020], including 11,203 "suspects" and 1,126 prisoners (News First 16 Jan. 2021).

## 5. COVID-19 and Access to Justice

The UNDP article reports that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Sri Lanka had a backlog of "over" 750,000 cases pending before the courts and that this backlog was "compounded drastically due to the confinement protocols that did not enable compliance with legal procedures and in person witness testimonies" (UN 15 July 2020). The same source notes that "[d]elays in court hearings resulted in prolonged detention of pretrial detainees and inmates eligible for early release" (UN 15 July 2020). A September 2020 report by the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) [7] notes that the government's measures against COVID-19 has affected Sri Lanka's judiciary and that since March 2020 "the normal functioning" of courts in Sri Lanka has been "disrupted" (CIPE 16 Sept. 2020, 1). A March 2020 directive from Sri Lanka's Judicial Service Commission (JSC) Secretariat instructed high courts, district courts, magistrate's courts, and labour tribunals not to hear open court cases and to reschedule cases, with the exception of matters related to bail or "[a]ny other matter where the Judge is of the view that it should be attended to without delay" (Sri Lanka 19 Mar. 2020, 1). The same directive advises the use of virtual court proceedings for orders relating to the extension of detention (Sri Lanka 19 Mar. 2020, 1). According to the UNDP article, on 11 June 2020, Sri Lanka's cabinet approved an expansion of remote hearings to help reduce the "inordinate delays within the judicial sector which average 17 years for criminal case completion" (UN 15 July 2020).

The CIPE report notes that the "selective application of due process rights, often to the exclusion of minorities or persons overtly critical of the government, Buddhism, or the Buddhist clergy," which predated COVID-19, has been "exacerbated" by COVID-19 (CIPE 16 Sept. 2020, 4). The same source notes that "[t]here is greater space for selectivity and abuse of process as there is limited access to courtrooms and judges who enforce the law, despite measures put in place by the JSC" (CIPE 16 Sept. 2020, 4). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

## Notes

[1] The Asian Development Bank (ADB) is "a multilateral development bank owned by 68 members, [including] 49 from Asia and the Pacific and 19 from other parts of the world" (ADB Apr. 2021, 4). ADB provides assistance to developing member countries through "policy dialogue, loans, equity investments, guarantees, grants, and technical assistance" (ADB Apr. 2021, 4).

[2] Freedom House indicates that on the Easter Sunday of 2019, three Christian churches and three hotels were targeted by Sri Lankan suicide bombers who claimed ties to the Islamic State; the attacks resulted in 269 casualties (Freedom House 4 Mar. 2020).

[3] Asian Survey is an academic journal by the University of California Press (UC Press) that publishes articles on a range of topics, including diplomacy, disarmament, defence, military, modernization, ethnicity, ethnic violence, economic nationalism, elections, and global capitalism, with a focus on South, Southeast, and East Asian nations (Asian Survey n.d.).

[4] The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) is an independent commission that is responsible for promoting and monitoring the protection of rights guaranteed by the constitution and ensuring compliance by the government of Sri Lanka with international human rights standards (Sri Lanka n.d.).

[5] The Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) is a non-partisan organization based in Colombo that primarily focuses on public policy and advocates for "policy alternatives for non-violent conflict resolution and democratic governance" (CPA n.d.).

[6] The Committee for Protecting Rights of Prisoners (CPRP) is a Sri Lankan NGO that provides legal aid and advocates for the rights of prisoners (CPRP n.d.).


[7] The Centre for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) is an institute of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and an affiliate of the US Chamber of Commerce that "works to support democracy and to strengthen the private sector" (CIPE n.d.). The NED is an independent, non-profit foundation, "largely" funded by US Congress, working to develop democratic institutions, including by providing grants to overseas NGOs "working for democratic goals" (NED n.d.).

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**Oral sources:** Center for Human Rights and Development; Centre for Policy Alternatives; Committee for Protecting Rights of Prisoners; Human Rights Commission South Asia; INFORM Human Rights Documentation Centre; Law & Society Trust; Rights Now Collective for Democracy; Sri Lanka – Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka.

**Internet sites, including:** Adayaalam Centre for Policy Research; Asylum Research Centre; Australia – Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; Bertelsmann Stiftung; Birkbeck, University of London – World Prison Brief; Brookings Institution; *Business Standard*; *Ceylon Today*; Colombo Telegraph; Council on Foreign Relations; *Daily Mirror* [Sri Lanka]; *Daily News* [Sri Lanka]; Danish Trade Union Development Agency; Denmark – Danish Immigration Service; East Asia Forum; ecoi.net; EconomyNext; EU – European Asylum Support Office; France – Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides; Gender and COVID-19 Working Group; *The Guardian*; INFORM Human Rights Documentation Centre; Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka; International Commission of Jurists; International Committee of the Red Cross; International Crisis Group; *The Island*; Johns Hopkins University & Medicine – Coronavirus Resource Center; KPMG International; Law & Society Trust; *The New York Times*; Norway – Landinfo; Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development; PricewaterhouseCoopers; South Asia Monitor; Sri Lanka – Department of Prisons; Swiss Refugee Council; UK – Home Office; UN – Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Refworld, UNICEF, UN Office on Drugs and Crime; *The Washington Post*; Verité Research.

**Date modified:**

2020-06-01