



DIALOGUE

EXPERT SPEAK

20 APRIL 2020

“SRI LANKAN RESPONSE TO COVID19”

ABSTRACT

COVID19 has somehow become the reality for everyone today. The interview has tried to dwell into the questions pertaining to a Sri Lanka's response to the COVID19 Crisis and the challenges associated to it. In this episode of Expert Speak, Admiral (Dr) Jayanath Colomabge answers some important questions regarding response of Sri Lanka's citizen to COVID19.

EXPERT



Admiral (Dr.) Jayanath Colombage
Former Chief of Sri Lanka Navy

About the Expert :

Admiral (Dr.) Jayanath Colombage is a former chief of Sri Lanka navy who retired after an active service of 37 years as a four-star Admiral. He is a highly decorated officer for gallantry and for distinguished service. He is a graduate of Defence Services Staff College in India and Royal College of Defence Studies, UK. He holds a PhD from General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University (Sri Lanka). He was the former Chairman of Sri Lanka Shipping Corporation and an adviser to the President of Sri Lanka on maritime affairs. He is a Fellow of Nautical Institute, London UK. Admiral Colombage is currently the Additional Secretary to President for Foreign Relations and Director General of Institute of National Security Studies. He is a Guest Professor at Sichuan University and Leshan Normal University in China. He is also an adjunct professor at National Institute of South China Sea Studies, Haikou, China.

TRANSCRIPT OF THE TALK

Q.1. When did the people of Sri Lanka first get to know about COVID-19?

A. It was actually in January 2020. The media reported about it breaking in China towards the end of December. We came to know that immediately since we have Sri Lankan students studying in various universities in China, including Wuhan, where there were 34 Sri Lankan students. So, through them, we were informed that there was some kind of a virus spreading in Wuhan. We were monitoring the situation. In January, there was a requirement for us to evacuate students from China as the situation was escalating there. We brought down nearly 900 students from different parts of China including 34 students from the high-risk area of Wuhan. The 34 students from Wuhan were sent to a quarantine centre for 14 days. The other students who arrived from China were advised to be in home self-quarantine for the same period under the supervision of medical authorities. This was the first time in our history we carried out a quarantine program for humans. The Army came forward to build a centre in less than 72 hours. At the end of the 14 days, the tests of these 34 students came negative and they were sent back home.

Q.2. What were the initial steps taken by the government to contain the spread of the pandemic?

A. The President appointed an ‘Action Committee’ to make recommendations on how to contain, control and combat COVID-19, if it reaches Sri Lanka. On 25th January, we immediately implemented measures at our airports and seaports to check people with thermal scanning. On the 27th January, a Chinese lady who was leaving Sri Lanka was tested positive. We detected her and she was taken to the only Infectious Disease Hospital in Sri Lanka at that time. She was treated there and after numerous tests she became negative for Covid19 and she was sent back to China. It was a success story.

By February 2020 the virus was spreading to Europe, South Korea, Japan and Iran. The government established quarantined centres to accommodate possible foreign arrivals and enhanced facilities for testing what is known as PCR test. Furthermore, a public health awareness programmes were launched regarding good health practices and necessary precautions for facing a possible outbreak of Corona Virus in the country. Patient handling capacity in terms of ICU beds, ventilators were gradually enhanced and three other hospitals were designated as possible treatment hospitals for a virus. The government responded early with a pro-active approach and was getting ready to face an eventuality.

Q3. What are the major challenges in fighting the COVID-19 for Sri Lanka? How did it respond to it?

A. Despite our limited knowledge about this pandemic, we took all necessary precautionary measures to control it. Initially, we had a limited number of testing but we acquired the PCR machines, the tool kits, extraction kits etc. We were monitoring the spread of this in Japan and South Korea and knew that it is a matter of time before it reaches Sri Lanka. To prepare for it, we enhanced our capacities. Initially, four hospitals were designated for COVID-19 then 12 more hospitals were added and then 17 more were added. The number of ICU bed and ventilators were increased. Now the testing is happening at a large scale and even the people who are showing no or limited symptoms are tested. There is no community spread of the virus in Sri Lanka. We are still enhancing the ICU bed capacity, ventilator capacity, personal protective equipment capacity. The exit strategy has now also been discussed and implemented because the economy is been impacted heavily.

The high-risk zone which is basically around Colombo, where a large number of cases were detected will be opened on later stages. Sri Lanka has 25 districts but in 18 districts not a single case has been reported until the third week of April. The government had implemented a step by step, exit strategy to return to normalcy keeping in mind the precautions like social distancing, banning public events, preventing unnecessary public gathering, hands sanitization and washing, wearing face masks. All these procedures are now been followed.

Q4. How have people responded to the lockdown/curfew. How have rural and urban people responded to it?

A. In fact we have not gone to a lockdown. We only have imposed a curfew. We were a little careful when we saw when China went for locked down and everything was virtually stopped there. We kept some activities going on like fishing, farming, some apparel industry and in some limited capacity of the export industry. The essential services industries are functioning because when you have people confined to the house, it is difficult for them to buy food or medicine.

So by and large, people understood that this is a national health emergency. I believe people supported. Nevertheless, there have been 30,000 people arrested for violating curfew laws. They were taken to police stations to record statements and then allowed to go home. They will be produced before a court subsequently.

The Work From Home (WFH) concept has started and in most of the places, we are continuing with the work from home through the video conferencing and online activity such as Emails. Our military and the police were excellent in implementing the curfew and helped in contact tracing, identification, contact mapping, and contact treatment. This has helped in limiting the spread. Contact tracing is being done mainly by human intelligence, by the agents and not by sophisticated technology.

Q5. Before or after the imposition of Curfew, does Sri Lanka also witnessed internal migration especially with the closure of various industries?

A. Not really. Only on the day of the Curfew announcement, we saw some crowds trying to go home from major cities. Apart from it, there was no large scale internal migration.

The tourism sector is a domestic mechanism. In Sri Lanka, people involved in these sectors generally owns or buys land and build a hotel or cabana if one has more money, then they buy a little bigger land and build a bigger hotel. The workers are from the local areas itself. The setup and the functioning structure are locality based and hence we have not seen a large-scale migration in this sector too. Similarly, in the tea plantation sector, people are living there in the plantation itself. So, we didn't see a large-scale migration in that either.

Q6. What are the major steps taken by the government to help the daily wage earners? Has the government announced any relief packages?

A. The government quickly devised a mechanism to compensate people because there are a large number of 2-3 million daily wage earners in the country. The government paid them immediately Rupees 5000 to buy essential food items. They were also provided with food and vegetables. The government also started home delivery of essentials food, vegetables, fruits etc.

The government also intervened and started buying rice and vegetables directly from the farmers as the middle man who was making a lot of money and thus increasing the price became somewhat dormant due to restrictions imposed to combat the virus. The direct buying resulted in fall in price and the farmers benefitting directly.

Q7. Sri Lankan economy will see a hit. What will be major challenges for the economy?

A. Our economy is badly impacted and we need to revive the economy. We have a huge amount of foreign external debt to international, multi-lateral and individual lenders. We will not be able to pay immediately and therefore we have requested a moratorium. We have appealed even to the World Health Organization to make a plea on behalf of many countries who will be in this category. There is also an appreciation that we need to revisit our economic model. We were pretty much an import -oriented economy. A positive outcome of this pandemic is that there is a revival of our agriculture. We are self-sufficient only for rice, coconut and tea. Everything else we imported from other countries. Now there is reawakening developing among the peoples in Sri Lanka that we have to develop own agriculture and produce crops even at a little higher cost as it will be available in any situation for us.

Q8. You talked about that people are now realising that they need to do self-production of crops and agriculture. So right now what is the situation of supply of other things apart from rice? Is there enough stock for the other crops?

A. There is enough stock of rice to last for few months, till the end of the year. We could harvest the rice crop before the pandemic broke. We have enough stock of fish and vegetables. What we are short of supply of Mysore Dal which we import from Turkey and India, the Onions which we import from India. People have also adapted to this situation. As earlier no meal in Sri Lanka was completed without Mysore Dal. Now, people have switched to chickpeas. People are trying to adapt to the situation.

Q9. The apparel sector which fetches around \$ 5 billion revenue and employs 15% of the population. This sector will take a hit and factories are now closed? Has the government planned package or relief for these people?

A. All factories are not all closed. Apparel factories are owned by private enterprises. The factory owners rose to the occasion. They have not laid off all the people and have given full pay for the first month and have informed the workers that in coming months there will be some pay cut but still keep them in payroll.

The major problem is that there is a drastic fall in demand due to this pandemic which in turn will affect the production. Also, a lot of raw materials which are used in the apparel industry are imported from China and lockdown there has impacted the supply chain of the raw materials. So this industry is heavily impacted. The government has given some tax benefits and tax incentives and deferred payments on loans and things like that for this industry.

Q10. Tea is also an important industry. It is a major export item. Will the tea industry also see a slowdown?

A. On the contrary, there was this theory floated here the black tea has some chemicals which can enhance the immunity in the human body and it can control coronavirus. This has resulted in getting record prices for tea. Tea estates are functioning the workers were maintaining social distance even before. While working they generally maintain a 04 meters distance. This is there working style. Their housing is a problem as they are not very big. So, this industry was allowed to continue and the tea auction was permitted and conducted online. Due to this usefulness of 'Black Tea theory', the auctions recorded the highest price in recent months.

Q11. Majority of the tourists in Sri Lanka come from Europe, the USA and China. After this outbreak, this will take a major hit. Last year Easter attacks had happened and now this. So how do you see the tourism industry reviving in Sri Lanka?

A. The tourism industry is taking a major slump. Our largest tourist groups came, if you would have in a particular order, India was number one, China was number two, and Europe was number three. Unless the situation's settle in all the three regions that is India, China, and Europe, the revival of tourism industry will be extremely difficult. Moreover, the air travel industry also should become normal. Right now, there is zero tourism in the country. There are no foreign or domestic tourism So, tourism from these places will only resumes when they are completely able to overcome this pandemic. At present, we are trying to promote Sri Lankan fight against COVID-19 as a success story as we have been able to control the spread very well. To revive this industry the government will have to give benefits such as subsidies concessions, tax holidays and deferred payments. The tourism industry is linked to various industries such as the airline industry, the transport industry, the cottage industries, the food and beverage industry, agriculture. So this industry is very intricately interconnected and pervasive.

Q12. What has been the biggest advantage for Sri Lanka in fighting this pandemic?

A. One of the major positive things in Sri Lanka is this public health system. Our health system is not merely centred around the hospital. We have a very strong public health system. A district is divided into a number of the regions and every region has a Medical Officer of Health who is a doctor. We also have a public health inspector, he's not a doctor, but a community medicine expert, then we have public health nurses. Now, this system is in place in Sri Lanka since its independence. That means practically every citizen in the country is covered by this public health system. Even if you are living in a city and urban area, So basically, it was very easy for us to activate that mechanism and tackle the pandemic. The military has also aided by building a make-shift hospital in 72 hours, transporting the people from the airport to the centre of the quarantine within no time. Military is also assisting the public health system to perform their duties.

Q13. If I wanted to ask that is there any USP with the Sri Lankan society had in fighting this pandemic? Is it their day to day practices which they have been following their biggest advantage?

A. Yes, I think we have some very good hygienic practices in our country, like hand washing and some social etiquettes. In fact, hand-shake was not our formal way of greeting. We say 'Ayubowan', meaning 'may you live long' whilst clasping our hands together as in worshipping. But over a period of time, the peoples started this doing away with these good habits and got used to the fast-life.

Another factor, I can mention to you is the native herbal treatment that is the native medicine, the Ayurveda. Sri Lankans are still practising Ayurveda medicine and every household, they have some kind of herbs and herbal medicine. Now we believe these ayurvedic medicines may not be hundred per cent able to counter the pandemic, but at least it can enhance the immunity of a person which makes the person less likely to get infected by the virus.

Q14. Do you think that people are taking enough steps to limit the spread of this pandemic?

A. Yes, people are adhering to social distancing and social hygiene. The Sri Lankan society has some very good hygienic practices, coming from our grandmother and mothers, they would always tell us to wash your hands properly before eating or after returning home for work or school. I remember how my elders used to ask me to wash my hands, remove your shirts and trousers have a shower when coming from outside. Now many people are again practicing these good healthy habits. Many are wearing a face-mask and trying to avoid public transport.

About the Interviewer: Alakh Ranjan is currently working as Research Assistant with Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS). He has done his Masters International Relations and Area Studies, specialisation in South Asia and Bachelors in Journalism from GGSIP University. He has also worked as Young Professional on politics and foreign policies of Nepal and Bhutan at Vivekananda International Foundations (VIF). His research focuses on Soft Power Diplomacy and Indian Foreign Policy in the Neighbourhood.



About Expert Speak:



Expert Speak is an initiative by Asian Institute of Diplomacy and International Affairs (AIDIA), Kathmandu. It is one of the ways we are conducting Dialogue between the curious and the expert. These experts are from different fields with different experiences. Similar is the case with the interviewers. Under the project, Expert Speak, we are undertaking a series of interviews, not just in Nepal but from experts worldwide. The project intends to dwell on the key challenges to Nepal's Foreign and Economic Policies. Also, the project intends to understand Nepal's geopolitical challenges opportunities.