

Sri Lanka: Life turns upside down in corona lockdown

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The lock down imposed to arrest the spread of the second wave of the coronavirus in parts of the country stretched into a third week, stirring restlessness and mental strain among people.

Residents of Mattakuliya, Dematagoda, Peliyagoda and Katunayake complain that restrictions have shut down their lives and they fear they will become jobless.

The Dabindu Collective, a group of organisations representing apparel workers in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone (KFTZ) said that about 8,000 casual workers have lost jobs.

Most are from rural areas and from the north and east as well as from the plantations. They have gone home and are unable to come back.

Dabindu president Chamila Thushari, said: "Workers with less than three years in a factory are being asked to leave."

According to Board of Investment (BOI), about 39,000 workers, including 25,000 females are employed in 82 apparel factories in the KFTZ .

In the wake of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) saying that companies should take responsibility for staff and should contain the spread of the coronavirus among employees, factory managements have laid down strict conditions.

While several companies have moved to provide hostels with rooms and an attached toilet, other companies insist that workers rent rooms with such toilet facilities.

This has severely affected workers who have families, or are single mothers.

While a company provides accommodation only for the worker, families and single mothers have opted to remain outside the hostels.

The companies now insist that they provide proof of adequate sanitary facilities in their present homes. Workers have been asked to provide photographs of themselves posing in front of a padlocked toilet. Desperate workers who cannot meet this demand are posing at friends' toilets and submitting photographs.

"What can they do? They are in fear of losing their jobs. Renting a room with separate toilet facility is beyond the apparel workers' income," Ms Thushari said.

The workers said that although they do not like to cheat their superiors, they had no choice.

These are workers spread out in Anuradhapura, Padaviya and Ratnapura who have taken residence

close to their workplaces.

The Dabindu Collective said that the factories are finding ways to lay off workers and cut down costs.

All apparel factories in Katunayake, Seeduwa and Minuwangoda have resumed after the coronavirus outbreak in a Minuwangoda factory in early October, except for three factories which closed down during the first wave of the pandemic.

Also production bonuses for workers, overtime, and salaries have been slashed.

Some companies continue to pay the minimum salary of Rs. 14,500, supported by a subsidy from the government.

This subsidy ended two months ago in September, but factories are still paying the same salaries.

Ms Priyadharshini, 35, a machine operator at the KFTZ, married and living with husband and two children aged 4 and 10 years, said that the only income was the Rs 15,000 she earns monthly. Her husband, a driver, has lost his job during the first wave of the coronavirus.

“We cannot afford to rent accommodation with attached bathrooms,” she said.

The apparel companies now provide all workers with transport to and from factories, but those who are not in company hostels endure humiliation in public transport. One factory worker said that some bus conductors refuse to board them.

Also, some have been evicted from rented homes.

They are not welcome in grocery shops and denied treatment in hospitals.

For the moment, the negative sentiment has shifted because the virus is now in all provinces.

Those who are living in hostels provided by companies have their own complaints.

Anoma, 35, a machine operator, said that several infected workers and those who were in isolation because they were a first contact are being housed in the same premises.

“Around 50% of the workers in the company I work for have been exposed to the virus and we have to work with them,” she said. “They have come back after 14 days quarantine, but the virus may still be lurking in them. They should be in isolation for at least another 14 days.”

Meanwhile, people in locked down areas, Bloemendhal, Dematagoda, Modera, and Mattakuliya are frustrated and pleaded that they be allowed to resume normal life.

The police are now using military drones to hound curfew violators and are arresting them. Those in densely-populated, housing blocks are severely inconvenienced. They live in 500 square foot flats with no proper food or contact with the outside world. D.B. Fernando, 68, a security guard of a private company in Borella, lives with his 62-year-old wife on the third floor of 12 -storey block. He is in fear of losing his job.

His son, who is a welder in Badulla, cannot come home.

“We are not even allowed to visit the nearest grocery to buy food,” Mr Fernando said.

The government has assigned two to three persons to a floor and any purchases have to be made through them.

They had received a groceries pack from the government that is claimed to be worth Rs.10,000. Mr Fernando has not been able to collect his salary and his wife had not been able to collect her pension. "I want to go to work and resume normal life," he said.

Muniaandi Subramaniam, 57, an office assistant in a private company, and who lives in a multi-storey housing complex in Madampitiya echoed similar sentiments.

He is the breadwinner of a family of five, including his wife, son, 18, and daughter, 25, who has a four-year-old son.

He said government handouts are running out and he needs to work.

M.D. Anushka, 32, a driver in a private company, and who also lives in a multi-storey housing block said that he had joined the company only recently and is in fear of losing his job.

During the first wave of the coronavirus also he had spent three months in lockdown.

"We are not asking the government for anything but to lift the curfew so we can go to work," he said.

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