

# Sri Lanka: From driving tuks to selling fuel

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## **Three-wheeler drivers explain why they sell fuel on the black market instead of running hires**

The prevailing economic crisis has made life a game of survival for many, and in reality, in this game, there is little room for what is commonly regarded as right and wrong. To survive, people need to go to great lengths, sometimes with no regard for the ethics that they once believed in. “You cannot make everybody happy all the time” seems to be becoming the motto that more people believe in nowadays.

“Everybody wants us to go back to our usual profession because they need our service. However, no one knows or seems to care about the hardships that we, as people with no stable income, go through due to the economic crisis, and how important it is for us to grab this little opportunity to make some extra money while we can. Others are not saints; they would do the same if they had the chance,” a three-wheeler driver, who has temporarily halted transporting people and is now engaged in obtaining fuel from fuel stations and reselling it on the black market for higher prices, told *The Morning*.

That is the situation some engaged in the fuel black market, which is becoming increasingly popular among those who do have time to squander in fuel queues, experience. Although frowned on by the vast majority of the society, the fuel black market is essentially a new livelihood that the fuel shortage caused, and it has its own clientele who is ready to pay four to 10 times the normal market price for fuel.

### **A livelihood born of crisis**

The fuel black market, although illegal in a time of a fuel crisis, has become such a normalised racket that people who are engaged in it are not afraid to admit to such. Also, customers making deals with such persons openly in fuel queues are a common sight.

“Who would not do that, if they have access to fuel and a pressing need to provide for their families?” asked 39-year-old three-wheeler operator Kamal Perera (name changed on request), adding that every three-wheeler driver he associates with is engaged in the fuel black market.

He added: “When there is an inadequate supply, the gap between the supply and demand increases, and someone has to fill that gap. It is what we are doing. This is beneficial to both us and those who purchase fuel from us. On the one hand, we get to make money without having to transport passengers like before, which saves us time and energy and reduces the need to replace vehicle parts as often as before. On the other hand, people who can spend more money can purchase fuel without having to waste time.”

When questioned about the notion that reselling fuel on the black market is worsening the fuel crisis, he begged to differ: “A lot of people allege that we are worsening the fuel crisis by lengthening fuel queues. But, that is not true. We are merely staying in line on behalf of someone

else who needs fuel, but does not have the time. It is true that we are purchasing more fuel than we need. However, that extra fuel goes to someone who would have had to stay in a fuel queue if we were not available to do that for them. In fact, we are saving fuel for the country. Owners of big vehicles are entitled to more fuel than we are. Therefore, a three-wheeler operator who purchases fuel still obtains less fuel than a car owner who obtains fuel.”

Forty-four-year-old three-wheeler operator Saman Weerasinghe (name changed on request), meanwhile, described how the fuel black market operates: “We wait in queues for several days, and get the amount of fuel that three-wheelers are allocated, i.e. Rs. 3,000 worth of fuel, which is equivalent to little over six litres of 92-Octane petrol. We have already established a client base. Among them are those who distribute various goods such as spices, chicken, homemade food items, handicrafts, “choon-paan” (mobile bakery product) sellers, and fish sellers.

“Sometimes, we sell fuel to three-wheeler operators who still transport passengers and to ordinary people to meet their transport needs. This is a profitable business, although it is not very easy. We have to spend two to five days to get fuel. If one has a friend or knows a venal employee working at a fuel station, we can get fuel within just a few hours or almost immediately if fuel is available at the fuel station, and all we have to do is give them some money.

“However, that is not a loss, as we can make more money than we can through transporting people. Once we sell the fuel that we purchase, which happens within around three hours of purchasing fuel, we go home, and rest for a day. I usually give 90% of what I earn to my family and keep the rest for my expenses. For the next few days I have to wait in the queue.”

He added that prices on the black market range from Rs. 2,000 to Rs. 5,000 per litre of 92-Octane or 95-Octane petrol.

### **Impacts on three-wheeler services and passengers**

The popular belief is that although the black market gets fuel through various means, the fuel black market that operates through legally purchased fuel (in line with the Government-allocated quota) is dominated by three-wheelers. As this practice expanded during the past few months, the three-wheeler service, which remains one of the leading modes of private transport, has collapsed, rendering passengers unable to find vehicles to travel at a time where even public transport has come to a virtual halt.

Three-wheeler operators engaged in the black market acknowledge this reality. However, they point out the necessity to prioritise their own wellbeing amidst the economic crisis.

“Although my family does not get to see me as often as before and living in a queue most of the week is arduous, such sacrifice is needed in order to survive the economic crisis, as we cannot transport passengers like before,” 40-year-old three-wheeler operator Athula Fernando (name changed on request), said.

He explained: “If we did engage in services like before, we would end up spending all the fuel that we purchased after waiting in a queue for days and earning less than half of what we earn through reselling it on the black market. Also, at a time when the prices of three-wheeler spare parts have skyrocketed, transporting passengers is not advantageous to us.

“What is more, people still expect us to be fair to an impractical level. If we added to the fare the time that we have had to spend in queues and the high cost of living, they blame us. They are hesitant to accept the fact that unlike before, fuel prices and the maintenance of a three-wheeler are not the only factors that determine three-wheeler fares.”

In this context, he said that people cannot really blame three-wheeler operators for taking advantage of the prevailing situation in order to survive the economic crisis.

Meanwhile, several three-wheeler passengers lamented that three-wheeler operators being part of the fuel black market has resulted in not only a lack of three-wheelers to fulfil transport related needs, but also that three-wheeler operators that still transport people charge extremely high fares.

Twenty-nine-year-old private sector worker R. Chanaka Jayatilleka, explained: “There is clearly a severe lack of three-wheelers on the road. Forget about commuting to work; it is extremely difficult to find a three-wheeler even to go to a hospital in an emergency. There are still a handful of three-wheelers that still do their job. However, with the lack of three-wheelers and the high demand, they charge Rs. 200-500 per kilometre, which is beyond a reasonable price increase.

“There is no such thing as metered three-wheelers anymore, and the Government has to take action against this. When asked about these new and unjustifiable rates, their common answer is that they purchased fuel from the black market for around Rs. 2,000 and that they have to increase fares. People have limited options, and therefore, they have to pay them whatever the amount they demand.”

This situation, he said, is a threat to a lot of sectors that use three-wheelers as the main mode of transport and also to workers who use three-wheelers regularly.

Another person further noted that even taxi services that offer three-wheeler services do not have three-wheelers, and that even if they did, fare hikes are unbearable.

### **Boycotting three-wheelers**

It is in this context that there is now a growing demand for action against three-wheeler operators that resell fuel at higher prices and charge exorbitant fares. During the past few weeks, a large number of posts were shared on social media platforms regarding the same, and some even advocated boycotting three-wheelers.

One such post read: “If they (three-wheeler operators) can be selfish to think only about their wellbeing at a time when the entire transport sector is crippled, people should be brave enough to boycott three-wheelers.”

Another post said that once the fuel supply is restored, three-wheeler operators would have to return to their usual profession, and that the people should not use three-wheelers unless in an emergency or unless their destination is not within walking distance. What is more, some encouraged people to walk or take public transport whenever possible, without relying on the three-wheeler service. In addition, some wanted the Government to take action against three-wheeler operators who are engaged in the fuel black market.

However, some comments in support of three-wheeler operators said that it is unfair to expect three-wheeler operators to not prioritise their own wellbeing over that of their passengers.

Some noted: “They are working to make money. This is not a service provided to make people’s lives easier, and providing transport services is merely the nature of their job. If their job does not pay well amidst the crisis, and if a better opportunity arises to make more or adequate money, they cannot be blamed for going for that job.”

At a time when the Government is struggling to resuscitate the economy, every sector’s contribution plays an important role. When one important sector such as the three-wheeler service comes to a

halt, as some who spoke with The Morning pointed out, other sectors of the economy also get affected. However, it is also important to acknowledge that the three-wheeler service is also one such affected sector, and that people of any profession may tend to engage in illegal acts to ensure their survival amidst an economic crisis. It should be noted that three-wheeler operators are just one group that is perpetuating the fuel black market, and that there are other parties that do the same on a greater scale.

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**Sumudu Chamara**

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