

142nd IPU Assembly & Related Meeting Virtual session, 24-28 May 2021

Theme for the general debate

Overcoming the pandemic today and building a better tomorrow: the role of parliaments

An outbreak of a novel coronavirus (COVID-19) was reported from Wuhan Province, China, in December 2019, causing numerous deaths and complications. The infection rapidly spread to all parts of the globe and was declared a pandemic on 11th March 2020 by the World Health Organization. For over a year now, the world has been struggling with the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated health and socio-economic crisis. Globally, as of 10 May 2021, there have been 157 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 including 3 million deaths¹. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted people's wellbeing, disrupted societies and economies, exacerbated the already high level of inequalities and further widened the gap between developed and developing countries.

Aimed at controlling the pandemic, the government of Sri Lanka enforced a strict strategy of case detection and restrictions. The strategy was successful in confining the epidemic to 2,810 cases as of 29th July 2020.

However, a new cluster emerged on 04 October 2020, in the apparel industry workforce has posed new challenges for the country. The head start in preparedness has had a positive impact on the new wave of infection, with the National Operation Centre for Prevention of COVID-19

¹ World Health Organization, <https://covid19.who.int>.

Outbreak, presidential task force, and grassroots-level community health services being highly active. Mandatory quarantine, hospitalization of positive cases, self-isolation, and movement restriction with quarantine curfew are some of the measures that are expected to help contain the infection.

The third wave includes the current period, began during the New Year festival in April 2021. In the third wave, as of 11 May 2021, 128,530 COVID-19 cases has been recorded and fatalities, 827.

In Sri Lanka, as in other countries, the loss of jobs and incomes caused by the pandemic has been severe. While workers in almost every sector have been affected, informal workers who make up about 70 percent of the workforce are likely to be the most affected. The apparel industry, which employs about half a million workers, has been reportedly forced to cut a significant number of jobs. Daily wage earners, the tourism sector, small and medium scale enterprises have also been severely affected.

Education is another area that has been affected badly. Although schools and universities with advanced facilities have been able to carry out virtual classes, the country has an inherent problem with resource distribution.

Currently, the government recognizes the vaccination is the only solution to control the pandemic and Sri Lankan government as of 10 May 2021, has administered 925,225 vaccines as first dose and 211,518 as second dose.

Parliament of Sri Lanka focuses on containing the pandemic while restoring the national economy. Recently, Parliament passed legislation to reduce or remove import taxes of health related items.

With the aim of cutting down import expenditure, non-essential imports were suspended.

Poor and unemployed people were given financial assistance.

Small business and self-employed people were given relief by the banking sector.

Parliament needs to scrutinize the Executive Wing in formulating sound fiscal policies, including better tax system.

Budgetary allocations are needed for human resource development.

Parliament has an important role to play in post-pandemic economic recovery.