

SRI LANKA'S WORKER UNIONS GO ON STRIKE

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Several hundred worker unions in Sri Lanka on Thursday went on a mass strike, backing ongoing citizens' protests calling for the resignation of the ruling Rajapaksa brothers, as the country battles one of its worst economic crises.

Thousands employed in the health, education, road transport, ports, and railways sectors, struck work, held rallies, and chanted anti-government slogans. For months now, citizens have been struggling to access essential food items, fuel, and cooking gas, while contending with daily power cuts owing to a rapid economic downturn that government critics believe could have been averted with timely action from the leaders. As the crisis deepened, manifesting in severe shortages and record inflation, what began as small scale, neighbourhood protests across the island, swiftly morphed into a national movement resisting the once formidable Rajapaksa brand.

"If President Gotabaya Rajapaksa does not heed the call of the people's struggle within seven days, we will continue agitating until he steps down," said Ravi Kumudesh, Convenor of the collective of unions. Despite demonstrators' unceasing demand for his resignation, President Gotabaya remains in power, only offering to form a new, all-party government under his Presidency.

The political opposition has rejected the offer. President Gotabaya is scheduled to meet with coalition partners on Friday to discuss forming an interim government, amid speculation that he may sack his older brother and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa to accommodate such an arrangement. Meanwhile, Mr. Mahinda has said he will not resign, claiming that he still enjoys people's support.

Angry citizens who have been gathering in protest outside the Presidential Secretariat for some three weeks now, have now begun protesting outside Mr. Mahinda's official residence as well, waving national flags and displaying caricatures portraying him as Hitler.

The political stalemate has sparked concern among Sri Lanka's big businesses and private sector, who have urged authorities to take swift action, as the social unrest "may deter" any external help coming Sri Lanka's way.

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