

# WHAT IS THE 'FOOD EMERGENCY' IN SRI LANKA?

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People queuing outside a supermarket to buy essential food items in Colombo. AFPISHARA S. KODIKARA

On August 30, 2021, Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, using powers vested in the country's Public Security Ordinance, declared Emergency regulations pertaining to the distribution of essential food items. The regulations sought to empower authorities to provide essential food items at a "concessionary rate" to the public by purchasing stocks of essential food items, including paddy, rice and sugar, at government-guaranteed prices, and prevent market irregularities and hoarding.

President Rajapaksa has appointed Major General N.D.S.P. Niwunhella as the Commissioner General of Essential Services. In the week since the regulations were promulgated, several questions have risen on their legal ambit, and their likely impact on the country's larger economic crisis persisting for two years now.

## Is there a precedent?

According to Austin Fernando, a retired civil servant who served as Commissioner General of Essential Services in the 1980s, the post came into prominence after the 1983 'Black July' riots to ensure that affected families — Tamils who were targeted and attacked — had food supplies and other essentials; to facilitate their movement and return to their homes. "I held the post from 1986 to 1988 and was also tasked to look after the requirements of thousands of displaced in the North and East affected by the conflict," he told *The Hindu*.

## What is the criticism?

Criticism of the Emergency regulations has largely been over the government's legal choices, and their political implications.

In a commentary on the regulations published in Sri Lankan media, senior constitutional lawyer, and former parliamentarian Jayampathy Wickramaratne argued that the government — with a comfortable parliamentary majority — "had all the time in the world" to bring in any legislation needed to deal with the crisis but opted not to do so.

"The danger is that given the present government's propensity to stifle dissent, emergency regulations would be used to curb protests and other democratic action", he wrote in *The Island* newspaper.

## Is there a food shortage?

There is fear of one. The possibility has grabbed international headlines, with the government's drastic measures against hoarding, triggering speculation over food security in Sri Lanka that is home to 21 million people. Fuelling the speculation are different factors, including the country's known reliance on imports for essentials — such as petroleum, sugar, dairy products, wheat, medical supplies — its fast-dwindling foreign reserves, from \$7.5 billion in November 2019 to \$2.8 billion in July 2021, and the daunting foreign debt repayment schedule in the coming years.

The pandemic's lethal blow since early 2020, to all major sources of foreign exchange earnings

— exports, worker remittances and tourism — has further compounded the economic stress.

Sri Lanka's economy contracted by 3.6 % last year. According to the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, the Sri Lankan rupee depreciated by 10.1% against the dollar this year. It hovered around 200 against a dollar last week.

The fear of a possible food shortage also stems from the Rajapaksa administration's decision in April to ban import of chemical fertilizers and adopting an "organic only" approach.

Meanwhile, many, especially daily-wage earners, and low-income families, are complaining about being unable to afford, and in many cases access, essentials such as milk, sugar, and rice during the current lockdown, imposed on August 20 following a rapid surge in daily Covid-19 cases and fatalities, and extended twice since.

Prices of essential commodities — including rice, dhal, bread, sugar, vegetables, fish — have risen several times during the pandemic, and more rapidly in recent weeks.

### **What's govt.'s response?**

The government has denied reports of a food shortage. In a statement responding to international media reports, the Department of Government Information accused traders of creating an "artificial shortage". With the recent Emergency regulations, the government has "dealt with the situation," it said.

Few outside the government think so. "These Emergency regulations are not sustainable," said K. Amirthalingam, Professor of Economics at the University of Colombo. "Sri Lanka does not have a universal public distribution system or ration cards that can ensure essential goods reach all consumers. The current regulations do not address our fundamental economic problem, and instead pose the risk of creating black markets," he told *The Hindu* .

In his view, the recent measures, coupled with the government's move last year to restrict import of non-essential goods, are taking Sri Lanka back in time. "After four decades since our economy was liberalised, we are going back to 1970s," he said, referring to the time when then Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike promoted import substitution, a policy that her critics associate with food shortage and long queues of people waiting outside shops to buy essentials.

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