

# Maintaining National Security: Role of Sri Lankan Military during COVID-19

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National security means ability of a state to cater for the protection and defence of its citizenry. It is closely associated with the rights of citizens and the responsibility of the state towards them. Every government should give priority to national security. Initially the primary focus was on focusing on military security but now it encompasses a wide range of non-military dimensions such as economic security, food security, energy security, and environmental security. As Theresa May, the Prime Minister of Great Britain has mentioned “National Security is the first duty of the government”. Every country’s main duty is to maintain national security and in that case, the military is one of the main tools to protect citizens, nourishing the survival of the states as well as combatting crimes and threats. Everyone needs oxygen to breathe subsequently every nation needs to have an accurate policy to maintain national security since it is the shield of the country.

Sri Lanka is the pearl of the Indian Ocean and today faces a range of security threats so easily due to its geostrategic location. Coming almost exactly ten years after the end of Sri Lanka’s civil war which pitted government forces against a Tamil insurgency led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) – Easter Sundays Islamic State-inspired bombings shook a country struggling to find its way toward a stable peace. Sri Lanka suffered a disorienting blow on Easter Sunday, 21 April 2019, when a series of suicide bombings killed over 250 and injured hundreds of more Christian worshippers and foreign tourists. The seven coordinated bombings targeted three Christian churches – in the capital Colombo, north of Colombo in Negombo, and in the eastern town of Batticaloa – and three high-end hotels in Colombo, and later a small guesthouse south of the capital. This became a massive Extremist’s violence in Sri Lanka but the previous government’s immediate reaction to the attacks was confused and ignored. Due to the weakness of the former regime, tremendous downfall happened in intelligence services. As a result, many people have been killed in this particular attack. But according to the current process of the new president’s regime identified the weak points of the former regime and initiated new

strategic policies to face for the threats. Covid-19 is an ongoing so-called global health crisis and one of another major threat for the Sri Lankan government after the Easter attack by extremists. Government with the support of the Health ministry and Tri-forces, identifying new clusters using human intelligence and formed superior strategies. Sri Lankan government was together with the military initiated new precautionary measures while protecting citizens' rights and democracy. She rapidly mobilized its minimum resources to control the ongoing pandemic with the support of the efficient state-funded health services and the defense professionals under the visionary and able leadership of the President. This paper tries to identify how the Sri Lanka military maintains national security during COVID-19 and what kind of strategies were taken by them using military capabilities to mitigate crimes while combatting the health crisis to ensure a secure and safe country.

Sri Lanka as one of the countries that successfully secured good healthcare at low costs. She closely monitored the pandemic's movement right after the first case appeared in the nation and using human intelligence Tri-forces tracked any potential COVID-19 suspects and send them directly to the quarantine centers. While the entire world is engulfed in COVID-19 fear, the Sri Lankan Government, which is taking all possible precautionary measures to contain the virus, has also taken serious measures to combat crimes and threats.

“Proactive intervention to prevent any outbreak of COVID-19 within Sri Lanka” is the vision of His Excellency the President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. All preparations and actions of Sri Lanka are within this intent. The government of Sri Lanka acted well before the pandemic hit the region. HE President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, appointed Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva, as the Head of National Operation Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak (NOCPCO) together with the Chief of Defence Staff and Commander of the Army and Medical Specialist Dr. Anil Jasinghe, Director General of Health Services, with their handful of experts taking risk forward, and introduced new strategies to protect people from this health crisis. National Task Force was appointed by the government and they implemented the new approach called 3T( Testing, Tracing, and Treatment) to combat this pandemic. Sri Lanka has no plans to have foreign troops deployed in the country to combat the pandemic. The Island nation's military and police showed their capabilities in tackling the pandemic. According to the Defence Secretary Kamal Gunaratne “Our military has already shown their expertise and professionalism in handling the emergency created under the coronavirus threat,” Gunaratne said. Sri Lankan military at the forefront of the COVID-19 prevention operations. Also, Sri Lanka's intelligence agencies have been used to trace people who are closely associated with Corona virus-positive patients and the military had rapidly established more quarantine centers around the country and have been praised for their efficiency and the excellent facilities. As of 23 March, forty-five quarantine centers had been built

in the country by the Sri Lanka Army. Kandakadu, Punani, Galkanda, Meeyankulan, Welikanda are some of the quarantine centers in Sri Lanka. While Police have managed the curfew, responding curfew rules violators, the military has shouldered the responsibility for the national response from contract tracing to running quarantine centers.

After much discussion with the Chinese Government, Sri Lanka flew in a special flight and got these students back home. The night Wuhan was locked down, HE President Gotabaya Rajapakshae, formed a special National Task Force to ensure that Sri Lanka is affected only minimally.

The President was not only concerned about the health aspects but also of food security. The government stocked enough food to last the entire year. If the situation is reined in soon, Sri Lanka may have enough even to export. However, the government had initiated a door-to-door delivery system with the partnership of wholesale dealers and other service providers. The soldiers are under clear instructions to look after civilians in every way possible.

Sri Lanka Military not only battled the pandemic but faced many after challenges including Terrorism; extremism, maritime security challenges, organized crimes, cyber-attacks, and social media threats are some of the threats dramatically increased in Sri Lanka amidst COVID -19. Sri Lanka military is on high alert to maintain national security and ensure the safety of the citizens while controlling the ongoing pandemic.

### **Drug smugglers and Trafficking**

Sri Lanka is not a very famous producer or a manufacturer of illicit drugs but as a result of Sri Lanka's strategic locations, especially on maritime and aviation routes, Sri Lanka became the international hub for international drug traffickers. India and Pakistan are the two main origin countries for drug trafficking. Drug smugglers transport heroin, cocaine, and cannabis via illegal migrants or any other human traffickers. Sri Lanka's military seized this major illicit threat while controlling the virus in Sri Lanka. Likewise, the Sri Lanka military is given a central subject of attention to combatting drug menace. As a result of that visionary plan, Sri Lankan Military took some measures to crush drug and crime networks operating in prisons too.

Also Sri Lanka Navy has displayed the countries' largest-ever drug haul worth of Rs. 12.5 billion nabbed at international waters at the Dikkovita Fisheries Harbor recently. Recently Sri Lanka Naval and Police operations lead to apprehending 05 suspects with drugs again in Saveewa Pura in Puttalam, Poduwakattu, Mannar, and Pallemunei Districts. In addition on 09th October

2020, Sri Lanka Navy again apprehends 02 suspects with over 33kg of Kerala cannabis, during a special coordinated operation conducted at Naruvilikkulam in Mannar.

“Sri Lanka Navy’s detection of this large consignment was the best example to prove that the Government had not neglected its responsibility to protect the country while fighting against COVID-19”. (Major General Kamal Gunaratne)

Sri Lankan military eradicated terrorism in the country 10 years ago. And now they are committed to another task of combatting drug trafficking and taking speedy measures to nab drug smugglers during the pandemic. Crimes and illegal business became one of the major threats to maintain national security in the country. These issues even affect children and youth of the country, as they are the building blocks and future leaders of the country. If they are influenced at a young age, these kinds of illicit business and habits form them as criminals and it is a duty to combat these crimes.

### **Illegal Fishing**

This illicit business has increased during the pandemic since India marked as one of the topmost countries which severely affected by the pandemic and Indian fishermen have crossed borders for illegal fishing in Sri Lankan waters to harvest its rich resources. Sri Lankan has some threats during this pandemic and especially Sri Lanka Navy had taken several measures to prevent illegal migration and illegal border crossing for illegal fishing. The illegal fishing net is one of the serious threats to the Sri Lankan cross borders. The Fisheries Act (1996) implemented by the Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, strongly prohibits the mentioned illegal fishing method. The use of illegal fishing methods destroys the coral reefs, mangroves, mammals, and other endangered species such as turtles. The Mannar district in the north of Sri Lanka is famous for the fishing sector and this sector has been severely affected for the last three decades by the civil war. On 22nd June 2020, the Navy apprehended 05 persons who were engaging in illegal fishing, Iranativu Island apprehended 02 persons engaged in diving to harvest sea cucumber. Suspects 37 illegally harvested sea cucumbers, a dinghy, and several diving gears were taken into naval custody on the same day, the same Naval Command nabbed another 03 individuals who returned to the shore after engaging in illegal fishing without valid passes in the sea areas of Thavupadu, Mannar, and Irukulampiddi, Talaimannar.

Due to these illegal arrivals and illicit business, all the sea lanes are highly secured and the Sri Lankan Navy is on high alert to safeguard the international and local sea border from drug smugglers and other security threats. Illegal

fishing is one of the most serious threats facing the achievement of sustainable global fisheries and food security. The responsibility doesn't lie with one country, but with a strong and coordinated effort of international and national players. Illegal unreported and unregulated fishing can be illuminated by making more efficient on Communication between coastal states and fisheries management bodies and make more secure and powerful of ports control systems and more adequate Information sharing systems.

## **Illegal Alcohol**

Illicitly distilled liquor is a major business in Sri Lanka. Goda, Kasippu, and other illicit spirits, or unrecorded alcohol are categorized as illegal alcohol and especially consumed by low-income laborers and it's widespread all over the country. Among these bootleg liquors "Kasippu" became one of the famous illicit spirit businesses and it's become more popular during the curfew periods due to the pandemic. Since the liquor bars were closed all over the region.

Sri Lanka Military is on high alert during the lockdown period, to mitigate this illicit business and on 11th June 2020, The 69 illicit liquor casks (51750ml) have been detected by Sri Lanka Police Department. The suspect was 57 years old and lived in Kadana District. On 02nd June 2020, 6 casks (1,080,000 ml) of 'Goda' illicit liquor have been detected by Sri Lanka Police Department, and the suspect was found in the "Pubudugama" district. Those raids have been conducted by the Sri Lanka Army together with Police and was successfully seized and marked a point by arresting them. This is a major crime within the country but this has skyrocketed during the pandemic. Sri Lanka's curfew kept everyone at home due to this pandemic and some are used to engage in these kinds of illegal activities at that time. Sri Lankan military was keen on this subject and stopped people from being criminals. Sri Lanka is given high alert on maintaining national security while curtailing the pandemic.

Apart from that Sri Lanka Military tend to protect all citizens not only from the crimes and threats but also from natural catastrophes and according to the Defence Secretary Maj.Gen.Gunaratne said "The responsibility of the Armed Forces is to protect people in events like major natural catastrophes like floods and landslides, terrorism or hostilities and also virus outbreaks like the Coronavirus. But you are the ones who know the pulses of the people. Therefore you shoulder a bigger responsibility in protecting people's lives," Also Sri Lanka Navy launched some special sea operations around the country from the beginning of the novel Coronavirus pandemic to thwart asylum seekers fleeing from coronavirus-hit countries into Sri Lanka.

## **Conclusion**

Compared to other countries, Sri Lanka has been successful so far in the fighting against COVID-19. Since Sri Lanka reacted rapidly to early warnings from WHO and China. However the threat is not over yet. But, as a result of those great strategies, Sri Lanka has been recognized as a successful example by the World Health Organization. The Sri Lankan military is on the process of maintaining national security while controlling the pandemic. Because of these engagements, the Sri Lankan Military became one of the leading militaries. They deserve more and more recognition by the citizens as they not only controlled the pandemic but also stepped out of duty on combatting drug trafficking, terrorism, extremism, illegal fishing, and illegal alcoholism, etc.

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