

Sri Lanka Post is in a Humanitarian mission



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Introduction

Sri Lanka post is the pioneer of the communication industry in Sri Lanka. It is one of the oldest and reliable Government Department in the country. Especially Postal Department and its' employees are always friendly with people and providing their services to the public. Even during this epidemic period, SL Post is providing services to the people in various ways. They have now taken the responsibility to distribute medicine to people who required across the country. Department of Post is not charging any fee from the patients/recipients of medicines. This service is totally free of charge.

Due to COVID-19, mass gatherings are not be permitted. Elders and people who are suffering from non-communicable diseases are unable to attend their medical clinics as usual due to this pandemic situation. According to the request of the health sector, postal trade unions and employees have agreed to distribute medicine towards patients to protect their lives. To do it, postal employees have put their lives in to a significant risk but, for the wellbeing of the society. I must get this opportunity to pay my tribute to all postal employees for the magnificent contribution to this humanitarian mission to protect the lives of people in Sri Lanka.

Effect of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka

Social Impacts

Briefing the COVID-19 situation in Sri Lanka, the index case was a Chinese tourist who was detected with the illness on the 27th of January 2020 and admitted to the National Infection Disease Hospital. The first Sri Lankan patient known to be a tourist guide who had not traveled overseas was detected to have the illness on the 11th of March 2020. Having understood the potential spread of the disease over the entire population of Sri Lanka, the government of Sri Lanka took immediate sequential measures such as island-wide school closure, travel ban from selected countries such as South Korea, Italy, and Iran, declaration of special holidays to limit public gathering, shutting down the Colombo International Airport for all arrivals to the island, and finally deciding to impose island-wide curfew. As of 2nd of October 2021, there are 519630 confirmed cases of COVID-19, 13019 deaths, and 458646 recoveries.¹ (Figure updated 2021.10.02, 21:42:37)

Economic Impacts

It can be seen a down fall of Sri Lankan economy, due to the impact of COVID-19. By considering the Gross Domestic Production (GDP) of Sri Lanka in 2020, it indicated 3.6% reduction of GDP compared to 2019.² The one of main cause for the GDP reduction was inability to maintain the income generated by Tourism industry. Moreover imposing island wide curfew for longer period of time, implementing work from home (WFH), import restrictions, limited operations conduct by the business organizations, can be considered as some other main reasons for this down fall of Sri Lankan economy.

Work from Home (WFH)

In Sri Lankan context, implementation of WFH is a challenge due to existing traditional occupational types and manual processes. But the government of Sri Lanka always encourage the employees to WFH to mitigate the risk of COVID-19. According to the Annual Report of Central

¹ Health promotional bureau of Sri Lanka.

² Annual report of Central Bank Sri Lanka, 2020.

Bank 2020, that was not a successful effort especially in the public sector because of the current issues related to information and communication (ICT) Technology infrastructure and IT literacy.

³ WFH is not feasible with the Department of Post as well. Employees of the postal sector interact with the customers frequently. Hence applying WFH/ Teleworking/ Remote working is not feasible with most of postal activities in Sri Lanka.

³ COVID-19 Instigated Paradigm Shift in Work Routines towards Work from Home, Annual report of Central Bank Sri Lanka,2020,

Humanitarian Mission of SL Post

Sri Lanka Post

Postal system in Sri Lanka is under the government. Department of Post is one of the oldest Department in Sri Lanka and it has a long history of 209 years. Since 1892, Postal Department of Sri Lanka operating a traveling post office (TPO) system.⁴ So far this travelling post office system operating based in Central Mail Exchange, which is situated in the commercial capital of the country (Colombo). It is considered as one of the most historical travelling post office system in the world. (Due to COVID-19, travelling post office system also has temporarily stopped)

Present Post Master General of Sri Lanka is Mr. Ranjith Ariyaratne. There are 26781 employees employing within the Department of Post, Sri Lanka. There is a strong network comprising of 653 post office and 3410 sub Post Offices Island wide. It is the most powerful postal network in Sri Lanka with the capabilities to cover every single corner of the island. This strong network and energetic employees are the biggest assets of Sri Lankan Post.

Island wide medicine distribution

In the March 2020, Sri Lanka has reported its 1st case of COVID-19 within in the country. Then the government of Sri Lanka took immediate actions by imposing Curfew Island wide. Apart from that the government has been taken several actions such as restrictions of public movements, public gatherings, border closers, and mandatory quarantines. But, eventually the entire world has understood that this is not the appropriate approach and the correct answer to the issues generated by COVID-19. Then there is a new concept emerged in the world called 'New Normal' Concept.

Most of the countries in the world has been approached this new normal system and many countries are trending to follow the concept. Office activities resume through Teleworking/ Work from Home System (WFH). With applying all kind of safety measures and work place hygiene, employees resume their office work by maintaining the principle of social distance.

⁴ <http://www.slpost.gov.lk/>

But public transportation has been restricted. Mass gatherings are not allowed. Health sector employees are too busy with COVID-19 patients. Although all age groups are at a risk of contact COVID-19, elder people are facing significant risk of emerging severe illnesses if they contact the disease due to physiological changes that come across with ageing and potential underlying health conditions.⁵

At initial period of the pandemic, there was no any proper system to distribute medicines to the required people. Then according to the request of the Health Ministry, Post Master General requested from postal employees and trade unions to contribute for distributing medicines to people. Even though it is not under postal domain, postal sector trade unions and employees of all layers agreed to contribute for that co-operation activity.

It is really praised this humanitarian mission of SL Post by the government, media and people.

- **On 26th of March 2021, “The Morning” newspaper reported,**

“The Postal Department will deliver drugs to patients registered at government hospital clinics.

This will be carried out by examining the clinic reports of patients, assembling and parceling prescribed medication at relevant hospitals and issuing parcels to area postal officers.

The medicines will then be delivered to patients’ door step through area postmen, the Government Information Department said.

Meanwhile, postal services will operate for a minimum 2 hours during non-curfew periods.

The Government has also taken measures to use postal department vehicles and staff for distribution of essential goods to public.”⁶

- **On 21st of August 2021, “News First” reported,**

“The State Pharmaceutical Company and Sri Lanka Post has devised a method to deliver medicine to residents in major cities in the island. Patients can send in their prescriptions

⁵ WHO delivers advice and support for older people during COVID-19, World Health Organization,2020

⁶ The morning, <https://www.themorning.lk/postal-department-to-deliver-drugs-to-clinic-patients/>

via WhatsApp, after which the SPC and Sri Lanka Post will coordinate and deliver the medicine to the person's house.”⁷

Superintendent of Central Mail Exchange, Mr. Aslam Hassan stated that Sri Lanka Post already distributed over 2.3 million medicine packs to the people since the beginning of this program. 2305217 amount of medicine packs have been delivered to the people as at 30th of September, 2021. Most significant aspect is, SL Post not charging any fee or a service charge for the service provided from the recipients. As a responsible Government Department, providing a helping hand to protect the lives of Sri Lankan people in this difficult situation is the ambition of this mission, rather than earning profits. The collaborative support providing by the Health Ministry and State Pharmaceutical Co-Operation of Sri Lanka to the Postal Department in order to carrying out this difficult and reliable service cannot be ignored.

Former Postal Minister, Mr. Keheliya Rambukwella praised this humanitarian mission publicly. He stated this fact at the Sri Lankan Parliament during the budget debate 2021. He further stated that, “If postal employees would not be able to distribute medicine to the people on time in this difficult period, the death count could be higher than this”.

Well known trade union leader of SL Post and the **President of Sri Lanka Post and Telecommunication Services Union, comrade Chinthaka Bandara** stated that, “COVID-19 epidemic period is a very difficult period to the entire world. Especially to the elder generation and people who are battling with non-communicable diseases. They are with a significant threat for their lives due to pandemic. This will getting much worst if they unable to get their medicines on time. Especially when the country is closed due to

⁷ News First, <https://www.newsfirst.lk/2021/08/21/spc-sl-post-to-deliver-medicine-to-homes/>

curfew, they are helpless. Hence we have decided to contribute to this humanitarian mission, though this is not include to the postal domain in Sri Lanka.”

COVID-19 infections to the Postal Sector Employees.

There is a tendency that the employees who engage with this mission exposing to the virus often and infect COVID-19. Hence postal sector trade unions have demanded to the postal administration to provide adequate facilities to the postal employees.

Factors that Trade Union demands to the Postal administration.

1. Priority of the vaccination.

Entire world has accepted that the vaccination is the main way for survival from the COVID-19. That may not be the only solution. Surely it is the prime solution. After vaccinating, if somebody infected COVID-19, life threat is at a very minimum level. Hence postal trade unions demanded the priority of vaccination to the postal sector employees. Thereafter the Director General of Health Service has given the permission to the postal sector employees to get the vaccination with priority.

2. Close Post office for two days per week.

Even though the entire country has been closed due to the curfew, postal employees have to work. To mitigate the risk of COVID-19, postal trade unions requested from the postal administration to close post office for two days per week. Permission has been granted and Wednesday and Thursday of the week, postal sector employees get the permission to stay in their homes for the sake of their own safety.

3. Arrange transportation system to the postal employees.

There was a big issue about the employees' transportation, due to public transportation is not operating. Hence postal trade union asked from the administration to facilitate with a proper transport system to the employees. Then the administration arranged transport system through main roads, in order to reach Colombo. But regionally, postal employees' transport system is not operating up to the adequate level during the curfew time.

4. Transportation allowance for the employees, who use their own vehicles.

Most postal sector employees are reporting to the work by their own vehicles these days. The main reasons are non-operation of the public transportation in the country, inadequacy of the transport facilities provided by the Department in terms of the accessibility and higher crowd anticipate the provided transport service from the total number of the employees. Another reason is to personal intensions such as protect their health themselves and mitigate the risk of COVID-19. So, postal trade unions demanded to the administration for a transport allowance. Department Administration agreed to pay that, according to the provisions of Establishment code of Sri Lanka.⁸

5. Establish Department owned quarantine centers for treatments of COVID-19 infected postal employees.

By working and interacting with the people, Postal sector employees are having more risk to infect the virus. Hence, postal trade unions requested from the administration to establish Department owned quarantine center to treat them as well as their family members.

⁸ Public sector employees governing by the provisions of establishment codes in Sri Lanka.

6. Request for adequate sanitary facilities and equipment to the employees.

Department is providing face masks, soaps, hand washing facilities, sanitizers to the employees regularly.

Trade union movement during COVID-19 period

Six powerful trade unions of the postal sector collaborated and formed a powerful trade union alliance and named it as “Postal trade union Power”. All three UNI affiliated trade unions are partners of newly formed postal trade union alliance. Individually, all three affiliate unions offer a monetary compensation to their respective members, if the member infected COVID- 19.

Postal Trade Unions are always discussing about the rights of the employees with the administration as usual. Especially about the work place hygiene facilities and new safety protocols.

Conclusion

Sri Lanka post is one of the leading Department of Sri Lanka and it can be considered as the pioneer of the communication in the country. The biggest asset of SL post is their network and their set of employees. During COVID-19 period, SL post has been accepted the challenge to distribute medicines to the people of Sri Lanka. Most significant fact is, Department of Post providing this service without charging any fee from the recipients of medicines. It would be a great relief to Sri Lankan People especially to the elder generation and people who are suffering from non-communicable diseases, mainly because of both adults and patient with non-communicable diseases have significant threat for their lives due to COVID-19.

Sri Lanka Post, State Pharmaceutical Corporation and Ministry of Health collaboratively attempt to protect the lives of Sri Lankan people. This contribution by SL Post to this mission is immense. Postal trade unions are also provide their support to this humanitarian mission. Altogether, this mission is to enable to secure lives of Sri Lankan people and it helps to reduce the amount of death count during this epidemic period. Political authority of Sri Lanka as well as public always hail this Humanitarian mission of SL Post.

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