

This Is Where We Stand



Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva, Commander of the Sri Lanka Army, Chief of Defence Staff and Head of the National Operations Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak.

Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva, Commander of the Sri Lanka Army, Chief of Defence Staff and Head of the National Operations Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak spoke about the progress made so far in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic that has severely affected the world. Sri Lanka has been successful in containing the spread of the virus through timely action taken by the leadership of the country. The Commander says that daily life should resume while the people continue to take precautions where self-responsibility is essential to fight this crisis. Sri Lanka is in a good position in comparison to other countries and we stand well to progress further in unity. As the Commander of the Sri Lanka Army, Lt Gen Silva spoke about his career and the experiences he garnered during the last days of the war and his tenure as the Ambassador to the UN and Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN. He is the first commander from the Gajaba Regiment, one of the strongest fighting units in the Army. As he says life was not easy, but he is proud to be a Sri Lankan, and as the Defenders of the Nation, he believes that Nothing is Impossible.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe. | Photography Menaka Aravinda.

As the Head of the National Operation Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak, can you elaborate on the current situation in Sri Lanka?

We are proactively engaging with the situation under the guidance of His Excellency the President and Prime Minister. We have been successful in controlling the situation, where we have prevented COVID-19 from spreading in the society, which is the most important thing for any country. A high level of containment was done so that COVID-19 was restricted to certain areas such as the quarantine centers. I believe that we have achieved what is required by any country or person and that is curtailing the spread of COVID-19 in the society.

In the past weeks, we mainly found COVID-19 patients from Kandakadu cluster or those who have come from abroad with COVID-19. The most important thing is that we need to ensure that no COVID-19 patients are found from the society at any given time. We are conducting a large number of PCR tests from locations that we believe are sensitive. We are tracing whether the society is free of COVID-19. The only way to do that is to conduct PCR tests. We do about 1,500 to 2,000 PCR tests everyday. We ensure the containment of the virus through these measures.

We have gradually started bringing Sri Lankans from abroad and we are conducting PCR tests while housing them in quarantine centers before sending them back into the society.

We can be happy with the situation in Sri Lanka because from April 30, 2020 up to now, not a single COVID-19 patient has been found from the society. As a country we can be proud of where we stand today.

Sri Lanka was able to control the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus. Can you explain to us the measures taken?

His Excellency the President being a visionary leader established an Action Committee to observe and take immediate measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the country. The President took this initiative to establish the National Action Committee for Prevention of COVID-19 on January 26, 2020. The first patient was detected on January 27, 2020, a Chinese national who was visiting Sri Lanka.

The President selected individuals for the National Action Committee from a vast spectrum of individuals in the country. The members were not only medical professionals but those representing various segments of society whom he had confidence in. That was a great move.

The first situation that the country faced was bringing the Sri Lankan students back from Wuhan, China. The need for quarantine centers arose with this situation, which was a new thing for our country. The President assigned the task to me, to ensure that a quarantine center was established in Diyatalawa. That was the beginning of the quarantine system in Sri Lanka. Soon after the President formed the National Operation Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak and I was appointed as the Head of the Center on March 16, 2020. We assembled on a daily basis to discuss the strategy we are going to adopt to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The students from Wuhan were quarantined and returned home. Thereafter, the Government announced around March 6, 2020, that any passenger coming from Italy, Iran and Korea would have to undergo quarantine. That was a great move, which was made even before the first Sri Lankan patient was found in Sri Lanka.

With that decision, the President wanted me to establish a quarantine center for large numbers in Punani. He decided the location because he knew the area. I do

not need to explain but the fact remains, it was an uphill task to establish a quarantine center for more than 1,000-1,500 people. We were to transform a building complex in Punani into a quarantine center. Though the structure had been built, there was no water or electricity and we had to completely transform the interior. The military had to do everything. We had to provide 1,500 beds and more than 3,000 pillows. It was a massive task, but we managed to do that.

Initially, when people started arriving from Italy, Iran, and Korea, there was a strategy that we adopted at the airport. From the beginning itself, we had to get the military involved, because initially when the Health Authorities provided the buses to transport people to the quarantine centers, the drivers ran away. The Army had to put drivers to transport these people to the quarantine centers. We were trying to expose the minimum number of soldiers on the bus. We initially provided only the driver but when we found that certain passengers were trying to escape by holding the neck of the driver in the middle of the night in Dambulla area while they were travelling, we had to put an escort, which meant exposing two to three people. At that time, we did not know how COVID-19 behaved. These are some of the things that happened at the beginning.

The President made the right decisions at the right time. Universities and schools were closed in advance before anything could happen. Thereafter curfew was announced at the right time. While curfew was enforced, working online was introduced. This had never been done in the country. All this was done to ensure that COVID-19 did not spread in the country. The President also established certain task forces to fulfill various public requirements. Once the curfew was announced there was the issue of how essential goods would be provided to the people. Initially, the President provided a certain time period for people to purchase their needs. Thereafter, he established the Presidential Task Force on Economic Revival and Poverty Eradication under Mr Basil Rajapaksa for essential items to be distributed to all parts of the country. Cooperation and partnerships between the private and public sectors were established. Systems were established to deliver goods to houses. We managed to provide pensions to Senior Citizens. The task was assigned to the tri-forces. We have more than 14,000 GS divisions in Sri Lanka. Just imagine if we sent only one bus to one GS division, we would need 14,000 buses. It was a huge task, but we managed to bring senior citizens to the bank and then take them to the pharmacies to purchase medicine and thereafter drop them home.

We had to find a solution for people who obtain their medicine from the Government hospitals. They generally visit the hospital on a monthly basis to obtain

their prescription of medicine. We had to organize a way of delivering medicine to their homes without making them come to the hospitals during the curfew. A system was organized with the collaboration of the Postal Department who knew each and every house and they went and delivered medicine to these people. In order to cater to the people who do not fall into these two categories but require medicine, pharmacies were allowed to open during a specific time. These are a few measures that were taken. Every action was taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The military was given the task to transport workers in the Free Trade Zones to their homes so that they do not need to take private buses and mingle with other people. The Army provided 500 buses immediately. We travelled to all parts of the country to drop them home while curfew was on and before it was enforced completely in certain areas. We picked them from the Biyagama and Katunayake Zones. We found that during the latter stage, there were people who had come to Colombo for work and had been stuck for more than a month. A similar system was organized so that they too were taken home.

People with daily wages did not have a way to live. Therefore, a 5,000-rupee allowance was given to those people. Then the Government found that due to the prolonged curfew, businesses such as private buses and school services had no income. They were provided with various concessions on tax, insurance, and loans. They were given a period of six months, which has been further extended.

There were three important segments that we were focusing on. That was to firstly contain COVID-19, secondly prevent the spread of COVID-19, and the third was to ensure that COVID-19 patients do not die of the illness. By this time, we knew that many countries were suffering from the virus and there were many deaths. As such, these three were our strategy.

Mainly containment was done by introducing self quarantine and house quarantine. Initially, it was a new thing for us. COVID-19 was new, no one had the knowledge on how it behaves. With the knowledge of the Health Authorities and other experts we formulated a mechanism to adopt. Initially when a person showed symptoms, they would go to the hospital and a PCR test would be done to confirm. Till such time no one did contact tracing or PCR tests within society. That was the beginning.

Measures were taken while the ball was rolling. Proactive measures were taken

and that was our success. We did not wait till the last minute. We formulated a practical system without confining ourselves to the theories. Even in the war, we adopted a practical approach. We followed the books for such a long time and we finally finished the war because we adopted a practical approach. It was the same thinking with COVID-19 as well.

The most important thing that we did and I believe is the reason for our success, was contact tracing. Contact tracing was done for containment and to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The President brought together all intelligence agencies, health sector, and other stakeholders to conduct contact tracing.

With regard to contact tracing, we deployed the military, intelligence, the Police, and the Health sector. When the first patient was found and we spoke to him, he had already been in touch with 64 people. We had to ensure that those people were contained into one place – quarantined – so that the infection would not spread. Up to the first, second, and third contact we traced. We asked these people to be house quarantined. That was the beginning. Self quarantine went on in this way. Then we found a person in Mount Lavinia, a gem merchant. Usually, when we ask people to stay at home, we also check that they adhere to the quarantine by sending patrols thrice a day. We found that the person in Mount Lavinia was missing and that he had gone all over. Suddenly after two days, he appeared with fever at the Kalubowila hospital. By then he had transferred the virus to others as well. Initially, the Police would place a notice stating that the particular house is under quarantine. We found in Puttalam, when we quarantined a house, there were seven to eight people living in one room house. The term social distancing became the norm so we used to ask the people to maintain social distancing inside the house as well. That was the beginning. We went on like this but found that this was not going to work, because at times the people were not behaving as they should.

Thereafter as the President decided, since the house quarantine system does not work, we took the entire household to the quarantine center including those that they were in contact with. From self quarantine to house quarantine and thereafter we did the isolation of areas. High risk zones were selected and we declared these as isolated areas. We started from Ataluwagama, Puttalam, Beruwala, Akurana, and Maligawatta in Colombo. We isolated an area and put the entire area under quarantine. Then we found that even within that area, people are moving around. Thereafter, we introduced another mechanism called the root-balling system, which is for the first time in the world. The entire village, similar to a tree, was root balled and taken to the quarantine center under the discipline of the military. These are

the steps that we took.

Curfew was lifted in stages. Areas in which the highest number of patients were found such as Colombo, Gampaha, and Kalutara curfew was not lifted immediately.

In the meantime, we ensured that those who had got COVID-19 were treated and did not die from the illness. We had only IDH in the country to face a situation like this. There were many questions being asked and statements made at that time asking whether we have enough beds for patients at IDH. A decision was taken by the President and the committee to develop, improve, and establish new hospitals and convert certain wards in selected hospitals into treatment wards. One such place was Iranawila, where the Army renovated the existing building into a hospital. Welikanda, was totally transformed into a treatment hospital. That was a wise decision because most of the quarantine was done in the Eastern sector. Before IDH became full, decisions were taken to develop and ensure that there were sufficient facilities for the patients well in advance. As such, Maharagama, Iranawila and Welikanda were established as COVID-19 centers. The wise decision in converting Kandakadu Quarantine Center into a field hospital to treat rehabilitees of Kandakadu Rehabilitation Centre paved the way to stop the spread of COVID-19 into the society. Likewise, we established such treatment centers in many hospitals around the country. Once a patient was identified the health sector would look after them.

Though it was controversial and some did not like, we also looked at alternate remedies. As being Sri Lankans, our indigenous medicine is of a very high standard. I had a discussion with the President and he told me to get all the native medicine doctors to the COVID-19 center. We brought in more than 45 best practitioners in this field. We held discussions and there were different views on this. Honestly speaking, most of the people were using the indigenous medicine. I also advised everyone in the Army to use this indigenous medicine since what we wanted was to ensure that our people did not get COVID-19 and we took whatever precautions we could take to prevent the people from getting the illness. If you take a 360-degree view, we took all the possible measures to contain, to prevent spreading, and to see that the patients are well looked after.



Can you elaborate on the operations of the quarantine centers?

We have up to 75 quarantine centers, which are mostly operated by the Army, and the Navy, and Air Force also have a fair number of. The wise decision in converting Kandakadu Quarantine Center into a field hospital to treat rehabilitees of Kandakadu Rehabilitation Centre paved the way to stop the spread of COVID-19 into the society. [businessstoday.lk](https://www.burmesetoday.lk) AUGUST 2020 BUSINESS TODAY 19 quarantine centers. The establishment of quarantine centers started with Wuhan where we had to quarantine the 34 students who arrived from China. We did not know how to set up the quarantine center and we were told that there had to be separate cubicles. The hospital had only one building and we were thinking on how we can make 34 separate rooms. Yet, we established the center within 72 hours.

We did not know how COVID-19 is going to behave so we had to get one person to take the meals, keep the food in one place and come back. The doctors had to check the residents' temperature. We were not sure at that time whether it was

possible to physically go and check them. Therefore, we used machines to check their temperature and send us an sms. That type of a system was implemented initially. Reporting of any illness was done over the phone. We wanted to give the best to them. Establishing the quarantine center and giving a bed was not the only thing. We gave them every possible thing from slippers, toiletries, to everything. We provided free wifi facilities at the centers thanks to Dialog who provided the service. Then food; we could not provide a self serving service. We provided food in packets because we did not know how the virus was going to work. Once they had finished the meal, the remaining food was burnt and buried in another location. We went into that much detail.

Once the aircraft started coming in one after the other from Italy, it was very difficult, because the numbers went up to 7000-8000 at once. The same number of beds, pillows and all other facilities had to be given. Feeding 8,000 at once was not easy. It was all military people who cooked and served the food. We respected the various religious beliefs, and some were having their religious festivals, so we had to provide food at two in the morning and again in the evening to break their fast. We had to think of how we were going to protect our own people. We gave the best food we could give. We gave boiled coriander water and sago to ensure that their body temperatures were at a normal level. For children we provided food. Then whether a person is vegetarian, or non-vegetarian we ensured that they all received proper meals.

The cluster that came from Italy and Kuwait, they came to Sri Lanka with COVID-19. At the time they were taken to the quarantine center and checked, they had already got COVID-19. It was a massive task not only to look after the residents but to ensure that my troops do not get COVID-19, because we did not know how the COVID-19 worked. With the little knowledge we had at that time, we had to expose many military personnel from the tri-forces at these quarantine centers. That was a big task.

As far as the quarantine centers are considered, good accommodation, food, water and sanitary facilities were provided. The original buildings that were given for quarantine centers came in various conditions, the bathrooms were not all the same, we had to do the construction and bring it to the proper standard. We had to do things within a few hours.

Initially we had issues, because people were trying to give false information. People who were trying to avoid quarantine were saying that we were not treating

them well. Many asked me as the Commander of the Army whether this was so. One person posted on Facebook a photograph of a half-cut bottle saying that tea is served in such a container. I had to go on TV and explain, all I had to say was the people have to wait till the quarantine period is over and we will see what the people who were quarantined would say. We found how happy they were at the end. We quarantined 61 foreign nationals as well. They were happy and you would have seen the comments of these people. Initially, some were saying that by having so many people in the quarantine centers everyone will get COVID-19, what does the Army know about COVID-19? Why should they get involved? We prevented people from getting COVID-19 within the quarantine centers. It was a big process and most importantly the quarantine centers were run by the military including the doctors and nurses. I believe as defenders of the nation we need to protect our people.

Our numbers increased significantly due to the Navy and Kandakadu clusters. What could have been done to prevent this and were we successful in containing the spread?

Initially we faced the situation with the Navy, it was a very unexpected event. It was because of the misbehavior of drug addicts. By the time we knew many sailors had already got COVID-19. At that time, the first step that we took was to keep our citizens safe, in order to do so we brought servicemen from all three Forces back to the barracks. We did not allow a single story to occur saying that a civilian or society had been affected by the Navy. It was only the close contacts that they had and they too were quarantined. Not a single case was found from the society. The action that we took to bring them back to the camp was the right one. Of course within the camp there are large numbers, if you take Welisara there are 4,000 sailors and officers. Welisara being that large and to stop the spread and 900 plus, was a great achievement. Because in the camps the servicemen live together, they have two tier beds, one sleeps up and the other below. Keeping social distancing after it had already spread inside was difficult. We did not allow that to be a burden to society. There was not a single civilian patient reported from the Navy cluster.

Kandakadu was the same. By the time we found out a few hundred had got COVID-19. Because there could be asymptomatic carriers and you cannot feel or see it until you have a fair amount of symptoms, by the time we detected the first patient from the prison in Welikada, there were more than 200 COVID-19 in Kandakadu. But we managed to contain the virus to that place. We managed to get all of them through contact tracing to the quarantine centers. We have not given to

a single person in the society. Then the Rajanganaya cluster came, and we took the measures to isolate the area, we did PCR tests and we managed to curtail the numbers. I believe that these two clusters did not impact the society. During the first briefing, I said to give us one week, that we will get the situation under control. We took every precaution to ensure that it will not go to the society and we were able to achieve that. This is where it stands. Both were unfortunate incidents. But containment was done properly and we were able to stop COVID-19 from spreading into the society.

Timely information was provided to the people. How important was it to keep the people informed?

We had practical and clear communication protocols. That is to ensure that reliable and credible information was disseminated to the public in a timely manner to avoid unnecessary misinformation. This was of great importance because COVID-19 was a new thing. We had to make sure that the people were informed of the known and unknown things about COVID-19 and make sure that people are protected. I must thank the Sri Lankan media for the role they played during this time.

COVID-19 has no borders, it does not consider whether you are rich or poor, nationality or ethnicity as we have seen around the world. Irrespective of who you are, everyone was very concerned. We had to inform the people of this country as to exactly what was happening with COVID-19 as and when new information was available. Those with responsibility were given the task of providing the information. As the Head of the National Operation Centre, I was on television giving the information. The Director General of Health Services who is the authority on health was on the media. All the actions in terms of curfew, the Police representative was giving the information. The President and Prime Minister too, addressed the nation. Most importantly, those who were heading the various sectors in the COVID-19 prevention were on media and informed the public of the present situation and the right information was given to prevent the misinformation from spreading. I believe that was something really good.

Recently for my birthday, we had an almsgiving at home. Many priests came for the almsgiving. During the sermon, Ven Kollupitiye Buddha Rakkitha Thero, Chief Incumbent of the Kelaniya Temple, said that he watches the TV everyday in the morning to listen to what we had to say. He said that being a priest, he wanted to practice what we were saying. I felt happy because people were listening to us and behaving in the correct way. There are many who say that they would wait in the

morning to listen to me on what to do and what not to do. Initially, we started off with social distancing and then physical distancing. We never knew about these things. People behaved because the correct information was given to the people at the right time. That was the success. in-charge were on TV. All channels were connecting to telecast the same interview or program. Media performed a massive task similar to during the war and they gave us the required support. I must give the credit to the people for where we are today. The Information Department, and all the media channels were brought together and they were giving the correct information. Of course we found some people who were trying to give misinformation and trying to take advantage. But the misinformation was prevalent only for few hours, thereafter the correct information would override the false information. The most important thing was our clear communication. Reliable and credible information was given to prevent any misinformation spreading amongst the citizens. That was very important.

It was through the information system that we provided awareness to the people. The manner in which to wash hands, to maintain the distance, how to behave, how to wear a face mask, and how you should behave when in the society. We dismantled the disinformation system in the country.

Having you lead the National Operation Centre gave confidence to the people. Why is that?

It is for this reason that I personally went on air to provide the information because I knew each and everything that was happening. The President's leadership was such that every morning he knew the details of every single patient. He would monitor everything. Similarly, all the details were at our fingertips and we did not need to refer any notes since it was all in our minds.

The people know who the President is and they know who I am as well. We are not doing things for the first time. We have delivered and proven ourselves. We have delivered results on the tasks assigned to us. People have confidence in us. When we come out and tell something, the people knew that we are speaking the truth, because people have confidence in us. Certain individuals were trying to say that we are hiding the numbers, that the numbers are incorrect, but when we went on media and gave the information people believed us. As the Head of the Centre, it is an uphill task bringing all the different views to a consensus. I'm sure the President had confidence in appointing me as the Head of the Centre. Up to now to my knowledge, I have worked according to the President's and the peoples'

expectations.

At the COVID-19 Centre many things were discussed. Many people came in and gave their ideas and innovations and we encouraged them. They showed many innovations such as the disinfection machines, testing packs and various other innovations. Today, equipment that was being brought from abroad is being manufactured in Sri Lanka. There is innovation that has come out of this situation. I am grateful to all the members of the National Operation Centre who were very cooperative and some volunteered such as the GMOA, who gave their assistance in numbers to form strategies and to talk about the situation.

I believe that the people had confidence in us and that is why they listened to us and behaved properly.



COVID-19 is a medical crisis, what attributes of the military ensure that it

is able to fight this crisis/war as well?

The military is geared for any traditional or non-traditional situations. We have not only been facing war but also other calamities such as natural disasters, and climate issues. We are always the front liners to face any situation that may threaten the country. We have the experience. The most important thing is one must understand that the President being an ex-military officer, has the knowledge of how the military behaves, their capabilities and the resources that they have. The President knows the officers, soldiers and men of the forces. He knows their level of discipline, how determined they are, and what is their commitment.

The biggest tool that we have is the discipline that we have in the services. They will complete a task which is given to them, such as establishing a quarantine center in 72 hours. Why? Because we are a disciplined force, we go by instructions and people adhere to our instructions. We take up any challenge; our motto is 'Nothing is Impossible'. Throughout the COVID-19 crisis I was saying Nothing is Impossible. Therefore, we took this as a challenge as this is a health crisis. We were geared to face this, the Chemical Biological Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Response Team was established way before COVID-19 came to Sri Lanka. We had a unit with members from the Air Force and Army and when the Wuhan students were brought to Sri Lanka the CBRN Team did their job.

We have a very good medical system in the Army, Navy and Air Force. We have highly qualified doctors and they worked together in consultation with the Health Ministry and decided on the setup of the quarantine centers. The manner in which the beds should be placed, and the Standard Operations Procedures (SOP) for the centers were developed by them. The military always believes that we are there to protect the country, and the people of this country. To protect the people of this country, we are willing to take any risk. Similar to the war, though this is a different kind of threat, everyone was geared and it is also the commitment of our soldiers and officers. Commitment was at the highest level. They gave their beds for the quarantine centers and they slept on the floor. They did not grumble. Even the food that we had to give, we gave to the quarantine centers. We found our own way later. Just imagine an Army soldier driving a bus not knowing how many COVID-19 patients he is carrying until the PCR tests are done. That is the commitment and the discipline. The Army drivers did not run away like those of the civilian sector. It is sheer discipline and dedication that our people have. They believe that the country and its people come first.

Can you speak about how all the various organizations came together to control the spread of COVID-19?

The Center for the Prevention of COVID-19 was formed with the involvement of all stakeholders; medical professionals, military, Airport and Aviation, Ports Authority, Postal Department and former commanders, everyone was there. It was a cross-section of the society that was represented at the National Operation Centre for the Prevention of COVID-19. These various organizations stood together and that is the beauty of the people of this nation. However, some people try to say we are divided and not together, this is not true. We stood together that is why we are where we are right now. Everyone was supporting each other. The Army did not buy a single face mask because everything was donated by the various organizations. Those who could not physically come and support gave donations or some form of support. I would like to say certain hotels, such as Citrus and Dolphin gave their properties free of charge to use if we were running short of space for accommodation. Brandix group came forward and gave accommodation for more than 600-700 people. I felt that everyone was supporting each other.

At the Center, all ideas were listened. It was discussed and argued and finally decisions were taken. I would tell the President the decisions we would take. With his approval, we would implement. Our unity was to that extent. The working environment was pleasant at the center with everyone respecting every idea. We did not just disregard ideas, we respected and discussed. When strategies were formulated we brought in the best experts such as the best virologists in the country to give us advice. Teams were appointed to discuss various points, then we formulated strategy.

Contact tracing was one of the best examples, which was done mainly by the SIS, Military Intelligence, Police and all other intelligence agencies, PHIs and the Health sector. All these people got involved. We did not keep room for any mistake. All organizations worked very hard.

Even the private sector worked hard to ensure that the people received essential food items. Our people did not starve without food. We did not see unpleasant situations arising where food convoys were attacked by the people like in other countries. People were so disciplined. They would have run short of various items but they did not misbehave or protest. The Government took all measures to ensure that the people were well looked after. Many donors came forward, face masks were distributed, and Ansell Lanka donated PPEs to the military. We have a

Ranaviru factory and we manufacture PPEs and face masks. People are manufacturing even from home. Therefore, everyone was very supportive.

Sri Lanka has been successful in controlling the pandemic compared to many other countries in the world. Can you elaborate on this?

When you consider the lethality of COVID-19, religion, caste, creed, nationality, how rich or poor does not matter. There are no borders for this virus. The most powerful nations around the world went on their knees in front of COVID-19. Sri Lanka, we can always say that we are a successful nation in countering the spread of COVID-19. In containment, curtailing the spread and also looking after those who are affected we are far ahead than many other countries. From the society we had only 313 patients. And within 50 days, we were able to prevent the spread of the virus in the society.

The best practices that we established at the beginning are the reason for where we are now thanks to the leadership of the President and Prime Minister. They took the right decisions at the right time. Those were the pillars behind the success of this story. Thereafter, we must salute the people of this nation. They are so disciplined. For the first time we saw people standing in queues at a meter apart. You do not find that discipline in certain other countries. The best so called countries have not managed to do that. But our people have been disciplined. We would have had a few who misbehaved which is a different story. Though through online channels there were attempts to spread misinformation, people did not believe that. People believed the Information Department and those who came forward to speak to the public in the media. The majority of the people behaved as disciplined citizens of this country. The success of curtailing the numbers is due to people as well.

We should not talk about COVID-19 in isolation. We have to always look at a comparison. I believe when we compare we are far ahead. The reason as to why our numbers are high as of now is because we have brought Sri Lankans from different countries with COVID-19. They have come with COVID-19, it is not that they got infected in Sri Lanka. I believe the Sri Lankan story is a successful story. We have a good strategy and good leadership. Which leader in the world knows all the information of the patients even up to the number of people that person had been in contact with? His commitment for the prevention of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka, was an example and that leadership was passed down to everyone so that COVID-19 is eradicated from Sri Lanka. That is where we stand; sound decisions and planning all

contributed to the success. Comparatively, Sri Lanka is well ahead. We will stand in the world map in a better place at the end of COVID-19.

How important is it to resume daily life?

We must understand that we do not know when COVID-19 will be eradicated from the world. No expert in Sri Lanka can say when we can clear COVID-19 from Sri Lanka. We have stopped the spread of COVID-19 from the society from April 30, 2020. But, we are bringing Sri Lankans from abroad. We have brought more than 20,000 Sri Lankans from abroad already. We have quarantined them and they are back in the society. We still have to bring another 20,000 more Sri Lankans from abroad. We do not know how many out of those numbers may have COVID-19 by the time they arrive. Therefore, finding COVID-19 patients from Sri Lanka will continue until the last Sri Lankan from abroad is brought to the country.

One must understand that until such time, and the last patient has also recovered in Sri Lanka, we have to live with this. Just because COVID-19 is there we cannot just wait. The country has to continue to work, people must earn, people have to eat so the country should move forward. Therefore, that is why the Government decided on having certain Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for all organizations. The private sector and the Government were given a task and told what to do to run their offices while keeping the various precautions to ensure that the ball is rolling. You cannot just stop because COVID-19 is in Sri Lanka. That is why with all these precautionary measures the country has to move forward. We will have to continue with the work provided that we take health precautions with the advice given by the experts of the health sector. I believe that this situation will continue for sometime. There are countries that are now experiencing the second and third waves. Until COVID-19 is completely eradicated from the world, I think we have to live like this for a long time.

How should we prepare ourselves for the coming days, as COVID-19 has not been completely eradicated?

Everyone will have to wear a face mask, and the washing habits that have been taught will need to continue. You cannot afford to reduce the level of precautions taken. We cannot relax any of these measures. I believe it is every citizens' responsibility to see that they will not get COVID-19. That should be the motto of every single citizen of this country; 'I will not get COVID-19'. For me to not get COVID-19, what are the things that I should do? These have already been told, wear

a face mask, washing hands and keeping social/physical distance. In case, if you have symptoms then you have to quickly report to a doctor and thereafter a hospital for proper treatment. Provided that you take all these precautions, the chances of getting COVID-19 is a minimum.

When you go into the society and meet up with other people you should always think that someone might be having COVID-19. You must ensure that you do not give COVID-19 to anyone and you must make sure that you do not get COVID-19. In March, I said we should not go and shop for COVID-19 and bring it home. Therefore, I believe if we are disciplined, we can manage. I appeal from the people of this country to follow the best practices that have been given to them.

Can you also speak about the behavior of the Sri Lankan people in heeding to the call of the Government for discipline and taking precautionary measures?

Hats off to the people of this country. I could say that the people have been very disciplined in this country. They listened and adhered to all the precautionary measures and ensured that COVID-19 did not spread. People believed in us. Information was disseminated to the people in a proper manner through the protocols that we practiced. Because of that people knew exactly what was happening. The media was working around the clock providing all types of information. Every citizen is now aware of how we should all protect ourselves. Everyone who knew about COVID-19 came on air and provided the information to the people.

During the curfew period we saw the sheer commitment of the people without being able to move anywhere. That paved the way for us to have this successful story. The success was always within the hands of the people and it is up to them to ensure that we will finally reach victory, we are on our way.

Moving on to the general scenario, what about the private sector and the enabling environment for them to perform?

I will say that this must be considered as a golden opportunity for the private sector to do much more than where they were. Sri Lankan companies have been exporting certain PPEs, masks and various other equipment to numerous countries. From day one I was personally thinking that 'be Sri Lankan, buy Sri Lankan' method should be adopted in this country. People are now geared towards this. During the

curfew, people were asking what to do. I said they should start growing vegetables in their homes. When they say they do not have a plot of land to cultivate I said to plant even in a pot so that they could grow something. There are also many opportunities that have arisen because of COVID-19. Families had time to be together, novel things such as online learning were introduced. I believe that the private sector has got a golden opportunity to have this motto 'be Sri Lankan, buy Sri Lankan'. We say buy our products. Purchase the products produced by our private sector. We will be in a good place in the world map in time to come. I believe that the private sector must take this advantage of post COVID-19. They had to go through many hardships, exports stopped because other countries are not allowing goods to come in. Those things have been there and that is why concessions have been given by the Government. But if the leaders of the private sector get together and work hard they will find that this is the best era for them to come out and go to the world.

The private sector can always trust the President because he has a vision. They should get onboard, and try to assist with the economic development and he too will assist the private sector. I believe that innovation, novel and proactive type of thinking will come in for us to do well. We must try to get hold of the overseas market right now. It is a good opportunity. Certain places are still not manufacturing and finding it difficult. This advantage should be taken, the private sector knows more than us about how to do business.

The military has been involved in development previously and today again the Army is engaged in development activity. What are your thoughts on this?

The President following his election wanted to increase the forest density in the country. We started with 'Thuru Mithuru Nawa Ratak', by planting trees initially. Previously, it was an overgrown paddy field in front of the headquarters. The Army started to cultivate paddy and we placed a walking track around the place. Today, you can see many people walking/exercising in front of the headquarters. We are developing the entire area from the headquarters entrance at Denzil Kobbekaduwa Mawatha to Parliament, in a similar way the President did when he was the Secretary to the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development. The Army, we can proudly say that we are not only involved in our primary role. The President got us involved in paddy with the Paddy Marketing Board where we assisted in purchasing the paddy from the poor farmers for a good price of 50 rupees. Initially, they were selling at a low price of 35 rupees. We bought at 50 rupees, therefore the private

sector is buying at 53-54 rupees. Now the farmers cannot grumble because they can get at least 50 rupees after our involvement.

We had to renovate all the buildings of the Paddy Marketing Board so that we could store the paddy. Thereafter, we were assisting to purchase paddy as well.

The President has told us that we need to get involved in the construction of roads. We are liaising with the Ministry of Highways. Our military engineers will be getting involved and we will try to give our best to see that the work is completed on time. We work 24 hours around the clock. In 2009-2015 we built many roads especially in the Northern areas.

You would have seen in the past few days the President visiting areas. Wherever he visits, it is a blessing for the people because we have already started developing all playgrounds and school buildings in the areas he visited after the people made these requests from him. We have already completed many such projects. We will continue to get involved as long as the President wishes us to do so. He has confidence in the tri-forces. He will utilize the services of the Armed Forces in the areas he knows we are capable in. We are running a strategy as of now which extends up to 2025. We are doing everything possible to see that the Army is capable. We want to be the leaders in every segment. For development, we will get involved in the areas that are being assigned to us. Nothing is impossible.

The President has already announced that the military will support in agriculture as well. We have already acquired bare land for paddy, and we are cultivating 1,000 acres of cashew in the Northern areas as well. We are also involved in the manufacture of salt. We being a small nation with a small economy, the Sri Lankan military will definitely assist whichever way we can. We are not going to take a salary and only do our primary role. We are going to support the country in whatever way we can.

We are the leaders in managing any disaster. In every area, we have teams ready for any disaster situation. We have started the beautification of areas and we will continue to do that in all parts of Sri Lanka in days to come. We will also do activities to strengthen the unity between the people as well.

Can you speak about the experience of the final days of the conflict?

I can be proud and happy thinking about the final days of the conflict. If the

conflict had not ended at that time the people of Sri Lanka would not be enjoying the peace that we have enjoyed for the past 11 years. I am happy that I was a member of that team.

The final day of the conflict was finished by two Divisions of the Army, namely 53 and 58 Divisions. 53 Division was commanded by the present Secretary of Defence Maj Gen Kamal Gunaratne and I was commanding the 58 Division. We are the people who finished the war on the ground on the last day. It was very difficult. We conducted the Humanitarian Operations for two and a half years. We did not think about our lives, we were not worried whether we were going to live, we fought. I was commanding almost 21,000 fighting troops under me, my Division had the largest number of troops. The heroes of the 58 Division brought the greatest success at that time, that is to liberate the largest area, and we walked more than 200 km. We were the Division that walked the longest distance in the country to finish the battle. We rescued the highest number of civilians. More than 65 percent were personally rescued by the 58 Division.

During the final days, the LTTE took every effort to ensure their survival and to prevent our progression to liberate the land and to get the people on to our side. About one and a half months before at Pudumathalan, the 58 Division was able to rescue more than 130,000 people from the terrorists by doing the world's largest rescue mission. The LTTE had a civilian population that they used as a shield. They used every weapon to stop the liberation of the land and the people. It was very difficult. One day before the end of the war, the LTTE brought all the explosives in a vehicle and exploded it close to where I was. We did not work from behind but we too were at the front. In that explosion I lost my right ear drum.



It was very difficult but the soldiers were determined. A set of discipline people were working under us. When we asked them to go, they went, many knew that they would die. We did not send them knowing that they would die, but we had to protect the civilians as well. If we had not considered the civilians then the war would have been finished long before May 18, 2009. We wanted to protect our own people of this country.

We have more than 11,000 LTTE members who have surrendered and have been rehabilitated. We have reintegrated them into the society. During the final days the civilians were coming to our side. With them, the LTTE came in disguise and exploded themselves. When 130,000 people were rescued, they had not had food for months because the LTTE had taken their food. Whatever the food sent by the Government was taken away from them. There was no water. My Division had to feed over 130,000 people. President Mahinda Rajapaksa sent us food by helicopters

from Colombo because he knew we could not manage. Whatever the food the Division had was given to those people. We had to give them water. We innovated and made holes and placed taps in water bowsers so that the people could bathe. We had to look after the people until they were sent in buses to Vavuniya. Today, even though some people talk in a negative way, we were such a humane Army to look after the people, where even the surrendered LTTE cadres were looked after well. I can talk at great length about the final days.

Subsequently you were appointed as the Ambassador to the UN and also Sri Lanka's Deputy Permanent Representative at the UN. Can you speak about this experience?

I was appointed by the then President, His Excellency Mahinda Rajapaksa. I am sure on the recommendation of the former Defense Secretary and current President Gotabaya Rakapaksa. It was a novel experience. I did not know the A B C of being an Ambassador. I am grateful for the opportunity given to me. At the time when Secretary of Defence spoke to me about this position, I told him that I do not know anything about being an Ambassador. He asked me to meet Mr Palihakkara, the former Foreign Secretary and that he would teach me on the task I was assigned. I was initially sent as the Deputy and then promoted to Ambassador. On the very first day itself I saw a protest in New York; the protest against the Sri Lankan delegation who was attending the UN Sessions. There were more than 10,000 people. I wanted to do my best for the confidence that the Head of State and the Secretary of Defence had in me to appoint me as Ambassador. I wanted to do well. I am not a person who likes to fail in anything.

Dr Palitha Kohonne was the Permanent Representative and he helped me greatly. What I did was I did not only do my job, I started learning as well. I spent my personal money and I went to Harvard and studied. I am an alumni of Harvard, and very few military personnel in Sri Lanka can claim this. I wanted to receive the exposure and learn doing my job.

The biggest attack was from the diaspora. From the day one they were rejecting me. I believe the Government sent me because in terms of the war, I knew everything that happened, and the country was being spoken about at the UN. I went and interacted with the diaspora. The Sri Lankans living in New York are the witness to what I have achieved during my tenure in the US.

At that time, the Embassy was interacting with a very small group. I went and

started interacting with all Sri Lankans in New York. I managed to unite the Sri Lankan community. They came for Embassy functions such as Independence Day in large numbers. I organized many functions while I was there. Even today the present Ambassador Kshenuka Senewiratne will tell how I established an O Group in New York, like in the Army where we give orders to an O Group. To this day, the O Group actively participates in all embassy activities.

Throughout my appointment I was able to convince the diaspora on the truth. There were 10,000 protesting on the very first day I arrived in the country but during the last protest that I saw there were no more than 30-40 people. I managed to speak to them and interact with them and tell them the real situation. They were going by hearsay or someone else's versions. They did not know what exactly happened in Sri Lanka. There was misinformation provided to them and I was able to clear as many issues as possible. I was able to unite the people.

At that time, the Embassy was in a building that we had been renting for 56 years. I spoke to the former President and we managed to obtain a property for the Embassy in New York. We now have our own premises. The interior deco and furnishing were all done during my time. I got an artist to paint Sri Lankan pictures and I took the canvasses there and framed them. I am happy that these paintings are still there in the Embassy.

Even for UN Troops, I spoke to the UN and got many opportunities for Sri Lanka. For example, I managed to get over 200 Police Officers to work in the UN at that time. The biggest achievement for me is that during my time, with the consultation of then President and current President, I requested to send Sri Lankan Air Force helicopters to the UN and I was successful in doing that. During my time, six Sri Lankan helicopters were sent to the UN and they are still in operation. A fair amount of money is paid to Sri Lanka.

With the support of the former President and then Commander Daya Ratnayake, I offered a Military Hospital to South Sudan, and they accepted. I went on a recce and checked the place on ground and established a hospital during my tenure. Up to now the Sri Lankan Army Hospital is in Sudan. We have our doctors doing a great service in the United Nations. Then also in Lebanon, we established a hospital. We had more than 1,000 Sri Lankan troops in the UN at that time. Now we have only 300. I believe I was able to do these things for Sri Lanka during my tenure because of the confidence that President Mahinda Rajapaksa and then Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa had in me.

I was appointed as an advisor to the then Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, to a committee where peacekeepers salaries were discussed. Our committee did a great job and after 17 years or so, we were able to negotiate a salary increment for peacekeepers. We had to fight for that.

There were many protests at that time to ban me but I persevered during my tenure. The former President, current President, Foreign Secretary, they all know what I have done during my tenure. As a military officer, not a retired military officer, having been elevated to an ambassadorial rank, I managed to get our helicopters and our hospitals to the UN. The Sri Lanka expatriates living in New York are the best to tell you about my tenure in New York.



As the Commander of the Sri Lanka Army, what are your plans?

I was appointed as the Commander of the Sri Lanka Army by former President

Maithripala Sirisena and, the current President Gotabaya Rajapaksa appointed me as Chief of Defence Staff, while being the Commander as well. I wanted to be the Army Commander because I knew I had a huge length of experience that I could contribute to the Army. From day one, I have been fighting the war and I have seen the entire spectrum of capabilities of this organization. I want to make this Army one of the best in the world. We are small but we want to have a very smart Army. I prepared a strategy till 2025 initially and it will run till 2030 as well. It is a short, medium and long-term strategy. Talented officers, and the leaders of this organization contributed on what they want the Army to be.

I have prepared a strategy. There are four main focus areas; the Army has to protect the people, they have to protect this country, develop the Sri Lanka Army and ensure the well-being of the Army community. This includes the serving members, retired, wounded in action members and families of those who lost their lives. As the Commander of the Army, I believe that the reliance of the Army on the likelihood of the enemy's failure should not be the reason for the preparedness of our forces. We are on alert on all fronts. We are ready to face anything. The Army is prepared to face any situation in the country to ensure that the country is protected and the people are protected. But within the Army, I want to see a great Army in the future. I am working on many plans, it will take some more time to put everything in place but we will do that.



The first thing that I want is for the people of this organization to be happy. I said this during my first speech after being appointed as the Commander. I have given many promotions to officers. Within the last ten months of my tenure, I have been able to give the highest number of promotions to officers and men. It's massive when I compare with the past four years. The promotions I have given over the last ten months versus the promotions given in the past four years, is more than double or triple in numbers. They deserve to get promotions. They should not be stagnated in one place and should be rewarded for their performance. They should be happy. Those who deserve promotions should get promotions. I suffered because the Army was running only on seniority. Opportunities were given depending on the day you joined and the date you passed out. Just because of the results of one and half years, your 37 year career had to go on that system only. Today it is not the same. Today, we respect the seniority but we focus on the performance similar to the

private sector. Officers and the men are happy about that. We are living on tax-payers money, we will never be a burden to society. And we want to see that the country and the people are protected.

The people of this nation always believe in us. We ask them to continue believing in us and we will protect all of you. We will ensure that the country and the people are protected. Since we are facing COVID-19, try to protect yourself and not to get COVID-19. If every citizen believes in that they will be protected. We will eradicate COVID-19 from Sri Lanka very soon.

Your feats during the war are not unknown. Can you tell us about yourself?

I'm from the very historical township of Matale. My father was the Chairman of the Ceylon Transport Board (CTB). As there was no private transport at that time it was the CTB that managed all the buses and the railways. My mother was a teacher. I have two brothers and a sister. My elder brother is the CEO of DFCC Bank. My second brother was the Air Force Spokesperson during the war. He was an Air Marshal and he has retired now, and my sister is a manager of a bank. I am a product of St Thomas' College, Matale. I had a passion for cricket. I was in the Sri Lanka Schools cricket team. At that time, I honestly believe that, outstation schools were not given the chance to get into the Sri Lankan side. It was very difficult. I felt that at the time if I joined the Army, as it is a very powerful organization, I would have the opportunity to play cricket. I joined the Army honestly not for any patriotism but to play cricket. I was interviewed before the 83 riots, but I was taken into the Army on March 5, 1984. I played as a cadet. Then I joined the Gajaba Regiment, the best and strongest fighting outfit in the Army. The very first day of my life as a military officer, I got involved in operations. The very first day I joined the regiment, there was an explosion in Kokilai area and I had to go there. Thereafter there was no cricket for me because I am from a fighting unit.

I believe always that the biggest happiness for me in my life is to be born as a Sri Lankan in this country. I joined the Sri Lanka Army and the Gajaba Regiment. My entire life up to the point of being the Commander was brought up in the Regiment. When I began my military career I started with great leaders such as General Vijaya Wimalaratne, who I believe was the best military personnel that the military has produced in this country. He was my boss, he was the boss of the current President Gotabaya Rajapaksa as well, and also to the present Secretary of Defence, Maj Gen Kamal Gunaratne. All three of us are from the Gajaba Regiment.

I had a good start as a Second Lieutenant. What I believe is that my beginning was good. I was under General Wimalaratne. He was a tough task master. My life was a difficult life, being an infantry officer we were always engaged in active duty. I was injured as a Second Lieutenant in the Vadamarachchi operation. I was the last casualty in Vadamarachchi. I had 32 splinters in my body. My company commander died on the spot. I was injured with another 11. I was treated at the Sri Jayewardenepura Hospital for more than one and a half months. But I survived. I still have difficulties in my body though it cannot be seen from outside. I have a shrapnel in the heart, and it cannot be removed according to the doctors, because of that I cannot do MRI.

I am happy for who I am. Under Gen Wimalaratne we went into operations. I was the first ever Second Lieutenant or equivalent ranking in all three forces to receive three gallantry awards, WWV, RWP and RSP for the first time in the history of this country. Beginning was good. I was fortunate to be a Gajaba officer. In a very short period I became a commanding officer, to lead a battalion of 800 men, to rescue Jaffna town, which was known as operation Rivi Rasa. I am the youngest commanding officer ever produced, at that time, with only nine years service. Today to become a commanding officer you need at least 20 years. I had that opportunity. I am very happy to have been part of that.

Then I was part of the Humanitarian Operations to eradicate terrorism, I was the commanding officer of the 58 Division. Because of that I became the youngest Major General in this country. I became a Major General at the age of 44. Usually a person becomes a Major General at 52-53. These things happened to me in my life, and after the war, former President and current Prime Minister Hon Mahinda Rajapaksa and current President recommended me to be the Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative at the United Nations in New York. That was a great opportunity. I managed to be the first ever serving military officer, to get into an ambassadorial rank.

I have two daughters they are doing well. They are doing their studies. We have missed much of our children's lives. I think for my eldest daughter, I would have gone maximum three times to school in her total schooling days, because we did not want to expose our children at that time. The second one of course I do not think I have been to her school even a single day.

As a citizen born in Sri Lanka, I believe though it was not easy, I have done my part as a military officer to the Army and to the country. Even today with COVID-19,

which is a totally unknown subject, I am honored that His Excellency Gotabaya Rajapaksa appointed me as the Head of the National Operation Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak. For his confidence in us, we will not let him down. I am happy with who I am and especially my Regiment, I am the first Commander from my Regiment. That is the honour that I give my Regiment by being appointed as the Commander. My life has not been easy, but this is where I stand.