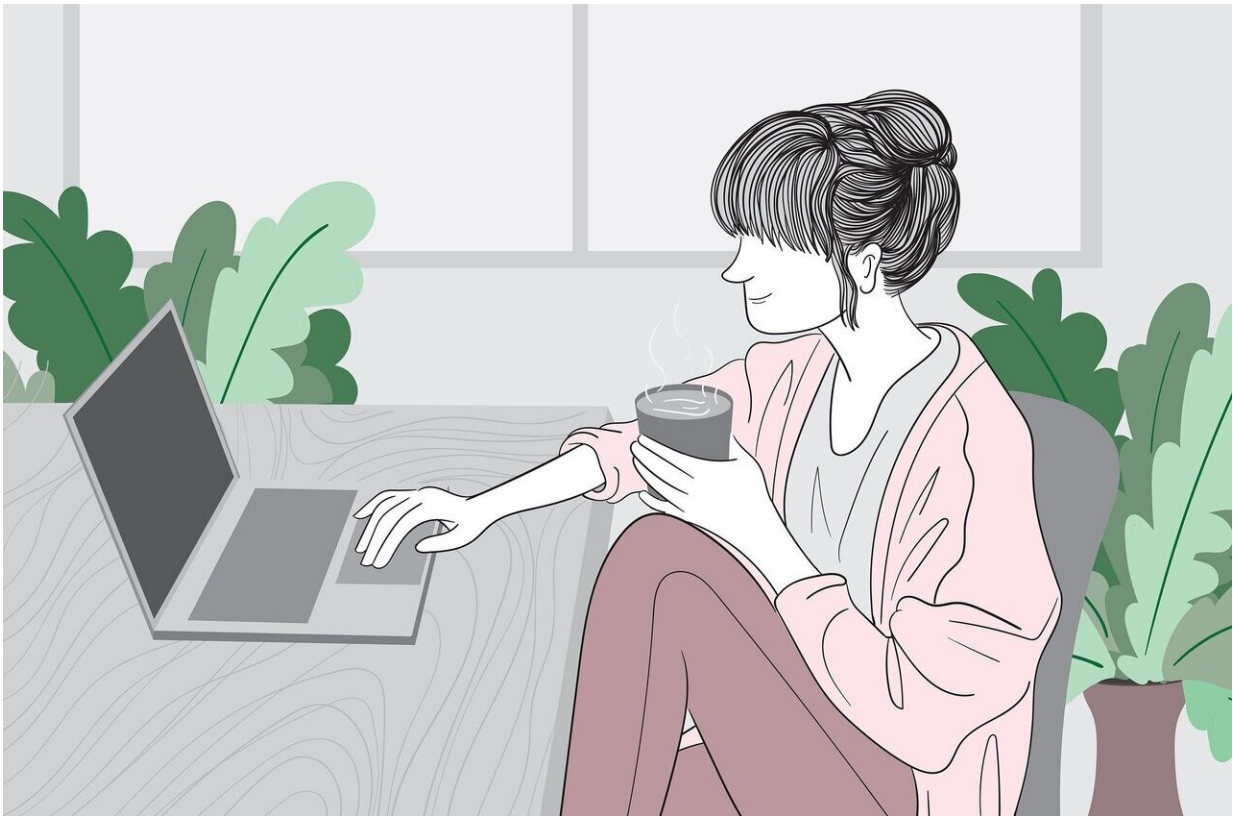


# Sri Lanka locks down as COVID deaths surge, hospitals overflow

August 20 2021

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Sri Lanka announced a nationwide lockdown Friday, bowing to intense pressure from medical experts as coronavirus infections overwhelmed hospitals, morgues and crematoriums.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who had resisted calls for a lockdown for weeks, agreed to the 10-day closure after dire warnings that hospitals could no longer cope with the inflow of COVID-19 patients.

"Nationwide Lockdown in effect from 10pm today to Monday (30/08)," health minister Keheliya Rambukwella said on Twitter. "All essential services will function as normal. I sincerely request all #lka citizens to adhere to the law and #StayHome."

Officials said the president was due to address the nation later on Friday night to discuss the public health emergency and measures to contain the pandemic.

Supermarkets, grocery stores and fuel depots saw large crowds stocking up on supplies as news of the lockdown spread over social media.

Long queues were seen at fuel pumps across the country and energy minister Udaya Gammanpila urged consumers not to cause shortages through panic buying.

## **Record death tolls**

The daily death toll hit a record 186 alongside a new high of 3,800 infections on Thursday with no more ICU beds available for virus victims.

Official figures show 6,790 people have died of the virus while 373,165 have been infected.

However, independent health experts have said the actual toll is at least twice as much.

Rambukwella said 10 days ago that the country had not reached a

"critical stage" and any lockdown would be a "last resort".

"But we are not there yet," Rambukwella told reporters on August 10. Since then, 1,568 people have died and 40,218 have been infected.

Junior partners in the ruling coalition and the influential Buddhist clergy had urged Rajapaksa to shut the country to contain the rapidly spreading Delta variant.

A junior minister for health, Channa Jayasumana, had called the Delta strain "a powerful bomb which has exploded in Colombo and is spreading elsewhere".

Sri Lanka's third wave of infections has been blamed on traditional Sinhala and Tamil New Year celebrations in mid-April.

Following a month-long lockdown, the government reopened the country in June relying on an aggressive vaccination drive as its main strategy to deal with the spread.

Despite over five million out of the 21 million population receiving two doses of a vaccine, the virus has claimed more victims beyond the capacity of state and private sector hospitals.

With bodies piling up at several state hospitals, the government resorted to mass cremations last week.

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