

Sri Lanka: Path to school is paved with perils; chaos in rural areas

Tuesday 5 July 2022, by [CHRISTOPHER Chrishanthi](#) (Date first published: 3 July 2022).

The Government's fuel-saving plan to keep rural schools open while shutting down schools in Colombo and main towns has turned out to be a bad lesson in crisis management, parents and union leaders charge.

In rural areas, teachers and children underwent untold hardship trying to get to school on time, with only ten percent of the private bus fleet operating along with a few Sri Lanka Transport Board buses. They were jam-packed.

In many areas, students and teachers waited for hours for a bus that had some room to step in. Many were seen squeezing into packed buses. Some children were seen precariously travelling on the footboards while yet others clung onto the side poles. Some schoolboys travelled on the rooftop baggage racks, notwithstanding the danger involved.

In overcrowded railway stations, students battled with office workers and other commuters to get into trains.

Although this has been an everyday occurrence in the past several weeks, the problem aggravated this week after the Government restricted fuel supplies only to essential services.

Parents and teachers hit out at the Government, saying it had not assessed or understood the damage they were causing to children's education.

With the provincial authorities being given a free hand to decide, they tried to keep rural schools open from Monday to Friday this week. Teachers were asked to report to work despite the transport problems they faced.

Although the Government, through a media release, announced that for teachers travelling from distant places, attendance would be optional, the zonal directors refused to permit this, saying no circular had been issued to this effect.

Meanwhile, in the Batticaloa district, term tests were conducted to the dismay of parents who complained it was unfair to hold exams when many children could not come to school on time due to the transport crisis. They also said the examination should have been postponed, as the syllabuses had not been completed.

The Ceylon Teachers' Union's Batticaloa District Secretary, Ponnuthurai Udayarooban, said that as many as 50 percent of teachers could not report to work this week due to the transport crisis.

In the Nuwara Eliya district's Walapane education zone, only three of the 29 schools functioned this week. The other schools did not function as only fewer than ten students turned up.

In the Kurunegala district, too, several schools did not function with the entire district grinding to a halt due to the fuel crisis.

The CTU's district secretary said that at the Kurunegala Royal College where he works as principal, the attendance was only about 25 percent and only those who lived close to the school were able to come.

He said the fuel crisis had rendered many parents jobless and with no income, they found it difficult to send children to school.

On a brighter note, in the Jaffna district, attendance was somewhat higher compared to the rest of the country. In the first two days, the attendance was up to 60 percent and it rose to 75 percent on Thursday.

In some rural areas in the north, primary schools operated at full capacity as poverty-stricken parents sent their children in the hope they could have their free mid-day meal, now provided by philanthropists and kind-hearted school authorities after the government's programme came to a halt due to lack of funds.

CTU President Theeban Arokiyanathan said that in some schools, principals and teachers got together to provide mid-day meals to the children.

Under the programme, the government spent less than Rs. 30 for a child's mid-day meal.

"Rs 30 was in 2018. But with the cost of living going sky high, suppliers now refuse to provide the meals," Mr Arokiyanathan said.

The Covid pandemic was also a cause to end the Government's generosity. With schools remaining closed for long periods during the pandemic, the programme died a natural death, he said.

The CTU leader said that although the new Education Minister Susil Premajayantha recently promised to revive the programme, it still remained dormant.

In the meantime, the Examinations Department is holding practical tests for students who sat the 2021 GCE Ordinary Level exams.

Many children have to travel from faraway places to Colombo to attend the exams.

"Amidst a fuel crisis, how can the Government expect children to travel?" CTU General Secretary Joseph Stalin asked, pointing out that some students had to come from remote areas.

On Friday, the CTU held a protest at Armour Street in Colombo demanding justice for students.

Chrishanthi Christopher

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The Sunday Times

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