

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP EXERCISED BY THE DEFENCE FORCES OF SRI LANKA DURING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

Thesara V.P. Jayawardane

Senior Lecturer, Department of Industrial Management
University of Moratuwa, Moratuwa, Sri Lanka.
thesaraj@uom.lk

ABSTRACT

Corona Virus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) is considered as one of the most mortal and dangerous pandemics humans had come across in centuries. Having gone through two waves of the Covid-19, Sri Lankan government took every necessary step in preventing and eliminating the deadly virus in order to ensure a safer country for the citizens. The Defence forces of Sri Lanka have taken the lead in supporting the governments' battle against Covid-19 and have extended a tremendous support to the Health sector and Public at large. The objectives of this study is to identify the main areas of strategic leadership exercised by the defence forces of Sri Lanka during the battle against Covid-19, to analyse the impact of the contribution made by the defence forces on Covid-19 and to understand whether external support moderates the strategic leadership exercised by the defence forces on Covid-19. The study was conducted on a qualitative basis with the research material obtained mostly from secondary data which included government reports and statistics, information from international websites, digital, print and social media reports. Face to face interviews were conducted with key personnel of the defence forces in order to clarify confidential information and ensure the accurateness of the data. It was identified that strategic leadership exercised by the defence forces include the areas such as planning and organisation, control and coordination, innovation and creation as well as prevention and notification. Key contributions made by Sri Lanka Army (Army), Sri Lanka Navy (Navy) and Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF) were identified. The support extended by the general public or the lack of it, along with the contribution from the health sector moderated the effort of the defence forces. It was concluded that the impact of Covid-19 on Sri Lanka was minimised as a result of the strategic leadership exercised by the defence forces.

Keywords: Defence Force; Strategic Leadership; COVID-19; Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

Defence Force; Strategic Covid-19 was declared as a Pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on the 11th of March 2020. With the growing spread of the virus, Sri Lankan government took all measures to ensure prevention and elimination by imposing travel restrictions, nationwide curfews, lockdowns and working from home methods. Sri Lanka faced two significant waves of the Covid-19 on the two occasions of March 2020 and April 2021. The total number of Covid-19 infected cases reported in Sri Lanka as of 8th October 2021 is 523,550 with 478,761 recovering and 13,229 deaths (Coronacracker.com, 08 October 2021).

The pandemic affected all areas of the country including education, entertainment, hospitality, automotive, tourism, retail and, transportation sectors. Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) tried to implement many measures to assist the affected citizens by providing with monthly allowances and subsidies and facilitating periods of interest free loan repayments. The main focus of the GoSL was to mitigate the spread, minimise deaths and ensure efficient vaccination.

The President, His Excellency Gotabaya Rajapaksa instigated the National Operation Centre for Prevention of Covid-19 Outbreak (NOCPCO) in order to face the Covid-19 battle. (www.sundaytimes.lk, 15 March 2020) Many identified this initiation as the inaugural step of obtaining the contribution of the Defence forces to fight Covid-19.

In a statement made by the Defence Secretary, General Kamal Gunaratne the general public was reassured of the commitment of the GoSL and the defence forces in protecting the country's 21.4 million people from Covid-19. General Gunaratne stated that "the military, which was the first respondents in a disaster situation, had come forward to support to mitigate spreading the virus further. The military is also tasked to analyse past records, items used, places that the infected people had visited and people whom they had associated. When a suspected coronavirus infected individual is identified, we direct them to a hospital and take all necessary measures to provide medical treatment. After admitting the patient to the hospital, we will find those who associated with the patients and, if we fail to trace their whereabouts, we will get the assistance of the intelligence agencies to track them to put them on self-quarantine process in their own houses" (www.defence.lk, 14 March 2020).

2. Research Problem

With the initiation of NOCPCO and the Coronavirus Task Force the GoSL started the battle against Covid-19 and some of the commendable actions taken include educating the public of the preventive measures, strengthening the public health sector, implementing strict social distancing and travel bans, island wide lockdowns and curfews, organising relief measures and aids and most importantly establishing effective quarantine facilities and vaccination centres. All of these procedures were supported or conducted by the defence forces of the country and even the Director General of the WHO highly appreciated the contribution of GoSL against Covid-19.

The dedication, hard work, commitment and high level of responsiveness of the defence force members in managing this pandemic has not been given due credit. Studies have been conducted on the contribution during Covid-19 by healthcare workers as well as decision makers of the GoSL but the support extended by the defence forces has not been studied in depth. The strategic leadership displayed by the defence forces during this pandemic crisis needs an in depth study which made the author identify a research gap that needs to be filled. Therefore, this study aims to bring attention to the said effort provided by the defence forces and this research was conducted to fulfil the following objectives:

3. Objectives

- * To identify the main areas of strategic leadership exercised by the defence forces of Sri Lanka during the battle against Covid-19.
- * To analyse the impact of the contribution made by the defence forces on Covid-19.
- * To understand whether external support moderates the strategic leadership exercised by the defence forces on Covid-19.

This study has taken information from various publications and documents to conduct a comprehensive literature review. As a result the various aspects of strategic leadership displayed by the defence forces were recognized and the conceptual framework was created based up on these findings.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Strategic Leadership of Defence Forces

According to Whittington et.al (2019) strategic leadership contains a component of soft skills such as “sensitivity, creativity, conceptualization, verbal reasoning and

communication, empathy, and spontaneity” which will be beneficial when leading a team against the Covid-19 especially in this global crisis environment. The strategic leaders who display prominence in these soft skills will be able to undertake higher levels of stress management and adaptability. “These skills enable the strategic leader to develop the necessary mind set to discern the local, regional, and strategic shifts that are endemic within the global crisis environment” (Dhanrajani, 2019). Such strategic leaders will work with a more team oriented and collaborative attitude which will guide and motivate subordinates to understand the responsibility of the task given and the value of their contribution.

At this global pandemic juncture with the Covid-19 battle, strategic leadership qualities are required to face the urgency and uncertainty of the emergency situations arising. The senior commanding officers of the defence forces who display such strategic leadership possess the necessary skills to design, implement and monitor detailed plans in this unpredictable situation. They require adjusting to the changing environment and challenging obstacles as and when they arise. “Senior military leaders must transition from what they know-the hard skills of detailed planning and the quest for certainty in the tactical environment-to the soft skills necessary to manage the ambiguities of an uncertain and continually changing environment” (McCauley et.al, 2020) .

As Hughes et.al (2005) points out strategic leadership has “responsibilities far broader in scope, both in time and space than a transactional leader”. Most of these responsibilities intersect and overlap with various tasks and projects they lead and most of the strategic leaders have numerous roles under their leadership umbrella. Strategic leaders need to plan and lead the team for the present situation while taking in to account the consequences it has on the future. Therefore, the strategic leaders are expected to work with uncertainties and lack of clarity which is the typical environment Covid-19 has presented the defence forces with. The strategic leaders are expected to have excellent communication and collaboration skills in order to guide, motivate and persuade the team to complete the tasks which is expected from the members of the defence forces.

4.1.1 Planning and Organisation

Planning and organisation are key aspect of strategic leadership and according to Petroy (2019) “its theoretical and methodological principles serve as the basis for

national security planning, including, military activities”. He further reiterates that planning and organisation is important to maintain the accuracy in the strategic decision making of defence forces when facing change, and implementing new policies that directly or indirectly affect the economy, science, technology of the country.

4.1.2 Control and Coordination

Control and coordination displayed by the defence forces are another key component of strategic leadership. As Nugroho et.al (2016) states “the coordination between civil and military organizations during crises and disasters, leads to a faster reaction and a reduction in the number of casualties and damages”. The coordination between the military and the civil has always made disaster managements achievable. Whenever a natural disaster occurs the defence forces are engaged in the relief operations and they assist the civil organisations. The control they hold up on public and their ability to handle conflicts and ensure rules and laws are followed assist in efficient handling of the disaster (Araghizadeh et.al, 2020).

4.1.3 Innovation and Creativeness

Innovation and creativeness brings a new dimension to strategic leadership. Innovation in the defence forces had brought technological breakthroughs and adaptive tactical applications to the betterment of the society. “Innovations in the military require an understanding of differing frames of reference, intricate structures, and diverse control and boundary systems. Military leaders use the term innovation to describe a new technology or new way to use an old technology” (Williams, 2009). According to Hunter (2007) Creativity is “the process of making something strange seem familiar and of making the familiar strange.” Johansson (2004), states that a creative idea “must be realized to be considered an innovation”. In the defence forces such creativity leads to innovations which find solutions to existing challenges or problems such as the pandemic.

4.1.4 Prevention and Information

Prevention has always been a key attribute in disaster management and informing the public of the current scenario and preventive measures to follow are some of the key steps of strategic leadership displayed by the defence forces. The President of Sri Lanka, His Excellency Gotabaya Rajapaksa stated that “proactive intervention must be followed to prevent any outbreak of Covid-19 within Sri Lanka” (State Intelligence

report, 2020). Therefore, the defence forces have maintained all necessary activities in prevention of the disease.

Defence forces have led the battle against Covid-19 all around the world. According to Popescu (2020), defence troops everywhere are “ready to assist with the pandemic and the military is assisting with setting up tents and transporting supplies. The coronavirus crisis has also shown that investment in military preparedness, equipment and training can pay off when a crisis hits”. According to Marrone (2020), military contributes in preparation for Covid-19 with “building hospitals, quarantine centres (QC) and also informing the public and, the Covid-19 pandemic will certainly give political leaders food for thought”.

4.2 Public Support

The support extended by the public is a crucial factor when a country is facing a disaster. During the Covid-19 pandemic the public support is of paramount importance as preventive measures need to be adopted by the public in order to mitigate the adverse effects. Shahid (2021) reports how the lack of support from the Pakistan public caused the third wave of Covid-19 deadly for their country. Sri Lanka handled the first wave of Covid-19 successfully since the public obeyed the quarantine laws strictly and adopted hygiene instructions precisely. During the second and third wave the public was being too lenient in their response to Covid-19 especially during the New Year 2021, which brought a sharp spike in the infected cases and death rate of the country. AP News reported that “negligence of government in implementing a lockdown, negligent behaviour of general public along with the teachers' protests have all contributed to the record spike of Covid-19 cases and deaths in the country” (AP News, July 2021). Some of the business owners voluntarily closed off their commercial spaces as a preventive measure which was an eye opener for the public. The lockdown imposed by the government from August 2021 to October 2021 (Economy Next, 2021) ensured the disciplinary of the public and was one of the key contributors in reducing death rates and number of infected cases. The support the defence forces receive from the public with the vaccination process and preventive measures determine the final impact of the Covid-19 on Sri Lankans.

4.3 Health Sector Contribution

As with any pandemic, Covid-19 requires the essential services of the Medical and Health Care Sector to combat it. From the beginning of the pandemic, medical

staff focused on early detection, isolation and, provided treatments while contact tracing was done through primary healthcare staff. This also included “testing, health surveillance and continuous monitoring” (Economy next, 2021). “In Sri Lanka, with cluster transmission, health surveillance is focused on detection of cases through exposed contacts to quarantine measures, comprehensive and rapid contact tracing of the infected persons and case identification. The health sector together with military, police and intelligence are trying to curb the spread of virus to the community” (France 24, 2020).

The support extended by the Epidemiology Unit and other medical facilities was one of the key success factors of Covid-19 battle. The defence forces came across a significant challenge when the medical and healthcare sector staff of Sri Lanka started an island wide strike (Reuters, 2021). Despite this obstacle the medical staff attached to the defence forces promptly acted to ensure the vaccination process continued without interruption.

5. Conceptual Framework

“A conceptual framework is the researcher’s idea on how the research problem will have to be explored” (Afibary, 2015). With the use of the literature review and the information obtained variables were specified for the conceptual framework. A knowledge gap was identified in the area of Covid-19 with regards to the contribution of the defence forces and the components of strategic leadership displayed by the defence forces were identified. The literature and the documents have identified how strategic leadership exercised by the defence forces include the areas such as planning and organisation, control and coordination, innovation and creation as well as prevention and notification. The support extended by the general public and the health sector has also shown to have an effect on the contribution of defence forces on the final impact of Covid-19.

Hence the below conceptual model was developed for the study by the author as shown in Figure

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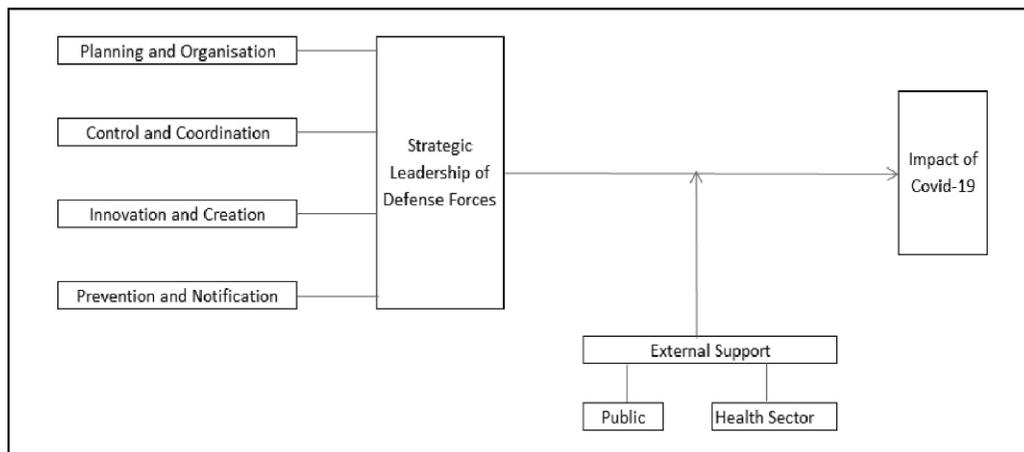


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework (Author Created)

The above conceptual framework analyses the sub factors of strategic leadership displayed by the defence forces in the battle against Covid-19 and it also identifies the moderating effect of the public support and the contribution of the health sector on the final impact of Covid-19.

As a theoretical implication the strategic leadership characteristics demonstrated by the defence forces can be recognised. According to Mirai (2019) strategic leadership skills can be identified as the ability to influence others so they would make choices willingly for the success of the project. Strategic leadership should be able to guide the team in the correct direction while bringing efficiency and effectiveness to the task. Transactional leadership aims to direct, delegate, supervise and monitor group performance. Transformational leadership motivates and inspires the subordinates. Strategic leadership skills can include both the transactional and transformational leadership techniques in the defence forces as it finds the best way of getting the work done. As Bradley & Charbonneau (2004) states “transformational leaders, especially in the military change their subordinates to make them accomplish their tasks at their earliest”. When applied to this conceptual framework, strategic leadership can be seen as how the commanding officers “inspire, motivate, influence and simulate the subordinates to achieve their common goals” (Warilow, 2012) which is to contribute in the country’s battle against Covid-19.

6. Methodology

The methodology of this study primarily includes the data and information extracted from secondary sources. As this is a narrative literature review, data from many forms were used in the study. The information retrieved from media was especially checked for validity and credibility. Many in person discussions were held with personnel with superior authority in the defence forces in order to ensure the secondary data obtained is accurate and credible.

It is always convenient and cost effective for the researcher to use secondary data but the actual validity and relevance needs to be ensured prior to being used in the respective study. For the purpose of this study the secondary data were collected from only official government websites and renowned international websites. Reliable publications including articles of scholarly journals, books, magazines, and newspapers were also among the secondary sources used for data collection.

The verified information and data stated in the ministry of defence website, ministry of health website, health promotion bureau website and official websites of the tri-forces were extracted. Covid-19 information available on WHO website and other credible websites were also used. The secondary data was also extracted from public libraries. Due to the online teaching many academics have contributed to studies on Covid-19 and, as a result many journal articles were found on the topic. Report presented in newspapers, magazines, radio and television programs were also analysed as secondary data. These data and information delivered details and statistics of Covid-19 in Sri Lanka, involvement of defence forces and the impact it had on Covid-19.

At a latter stage of the research the data and findings were clarified via in person interviews. Six (06) higher rank officials representing the tri forces and the Ministry of Defence (MOD) were chosen for one to one discussions with the researcher. They were chosen as per the ranks and the responsibilities they hold as spokespersons for the respective institute they work for. These selected representatives had the fullest knowledge of the details of the incidents and information that was obtained from the secondary data and had the authority to clarify the accuracy of the findings. The interviews were done face to face or, via zoom video conferencing. The interviews and the discussion which followed ensured the researcher received accurate details as well as a thorough understanding of the data found, as these representatives had first-hand

experiences of the Covid-19 battle in Sri Lanka. They were the strategic decision makers and leaders of the defence forces during the successful journey of the battle against the pandemic. This qualitative study was conducted as a content analysis which enabled the researcher to provide an accurate conclusion for the study.

6.1 Trustworthiness

As per Polit & Beck (2014), “Trustworthiness or rigor of a study refers to the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of a study”. The researcher collected the secondary data from government official websites such as the defence.lk and respective official web sites of the tri forces. These websites contain reliable and accurate information thus the researcher can ensure the trustworthiness of the information.

6.2 Validity

The results obtained were presented to military personnel, colleagues, academics, consultants and experts of the respective fields to obtain their feedback. This ensured whether the final findings were interpreted correctly. The information was also cross checked with experts of media and defence forces and professional bodies to ensure the validity of the findings.

6.3 Reliability

In order to ensure the reliability, the study had to be repeated. Once the first set of data were obtained and analysed, a second round of information clarification was conducted. This was mainly done as a cross checking of the secondary data obtained. The objective was to ensure that the findings would be the same or similar. Due to time restraints and resource constraints, it was impossible to repeat the complete process; however the findings from the key contributory sources were checked and matched for reliability.

7. Key Findings

7.1 Statistics

To fulfil the first objective of the research and to analyse the effects created by Covid-19 on Sri Lanka secondary data was analysed. The important statistics of Sri Lanka during the Covid-19 pandemic is identified as of 8th of October 2021 and summarised below:



Figure 2: An Overview of the Covid-19 statistics of Sri Lanka on 08/10/2021
(Coronatracker.com, 2021)

As seen in figure 2 the fatality rate of Covid-19 patients is 2.5% with a recorded 91.4% recovery rate. Main reason for these excellent results can be interpreted as the discipline conducted at the QCs and the efficient and effective service extended by the defence forces.

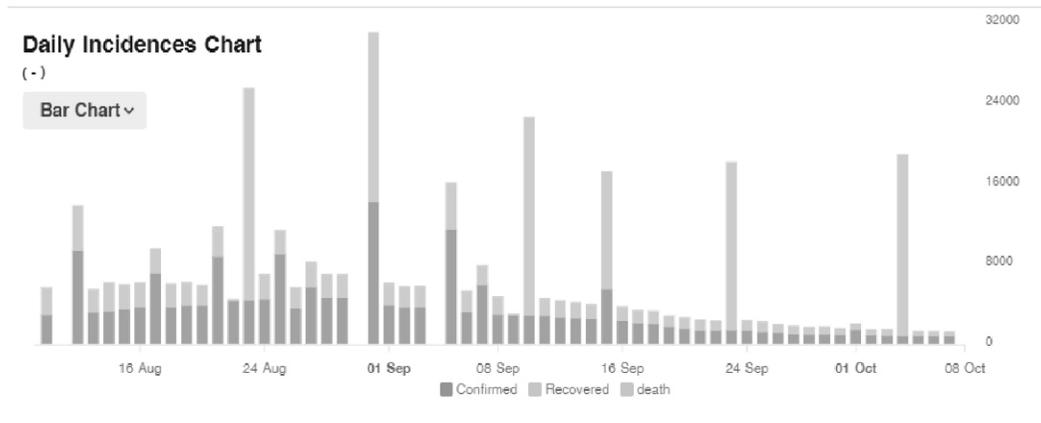


Figure 3: Daily incidences chart (Coronatracker.com, 2021)

When figure 3 is compared with figure 4, the increase in the number of infected patients can be compared along with identification of the clusters that were formed.

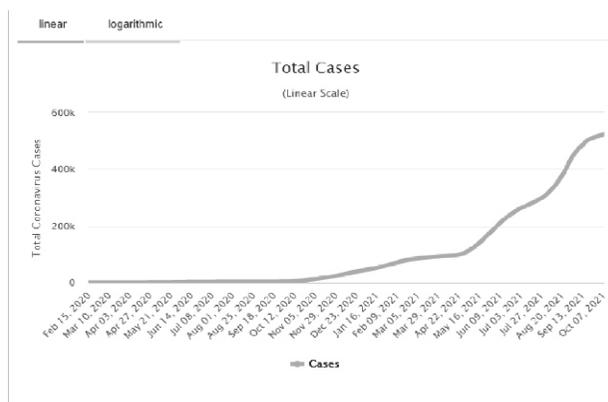


Figure 4: Total Covid-19 positive cases in Sri Lanka (Worldometer.com, 2021)

Figure 4 provides an analysis of the breakdown of daily Covid-19 infected patients while Figure 5 displays the gradual changes in the number of active cases.

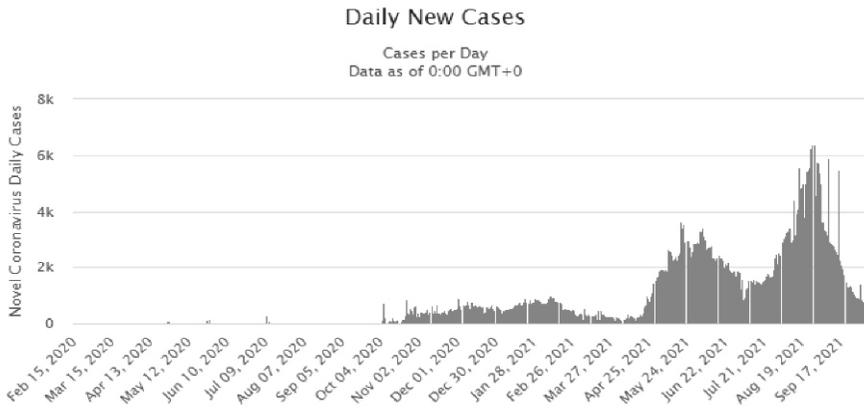


Figure 5: Daily new Covid-19 confirmed cases in Sri Lanka (Worldometer.com, 2021)

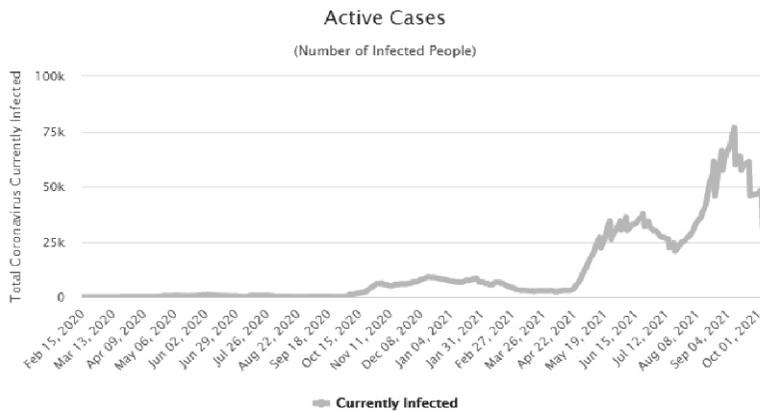


Figure 6: Active Covid-19 patients in Sri Lanka (Health.gov.lk, 2021)

Figure 6 provides a snap shot of the active Covid-19 cases in Sri Lanka over the past 20 months. Apart from the two identified clusters the active cases seems to be declining over the months.

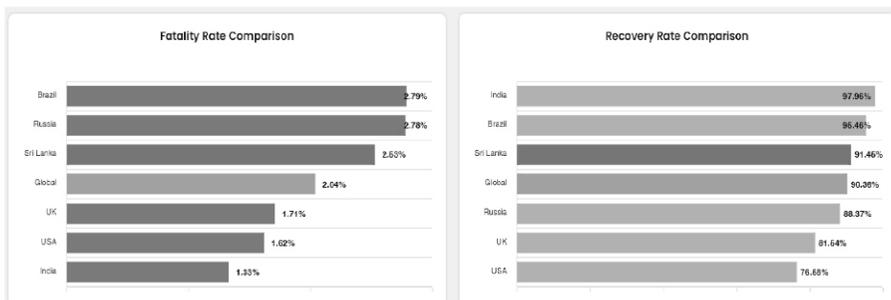


Figure 7: Fatality rate and Recovery rate comparison of Sri Lanka vs other countries (Health.gov.lk, 2021)

Fig. 7 is a comparison of the Fatality rate vs recovery rate while fig. 8 provides an overview of the statistics of Covid-19 in Sri Lanka in the past 2 weeks.

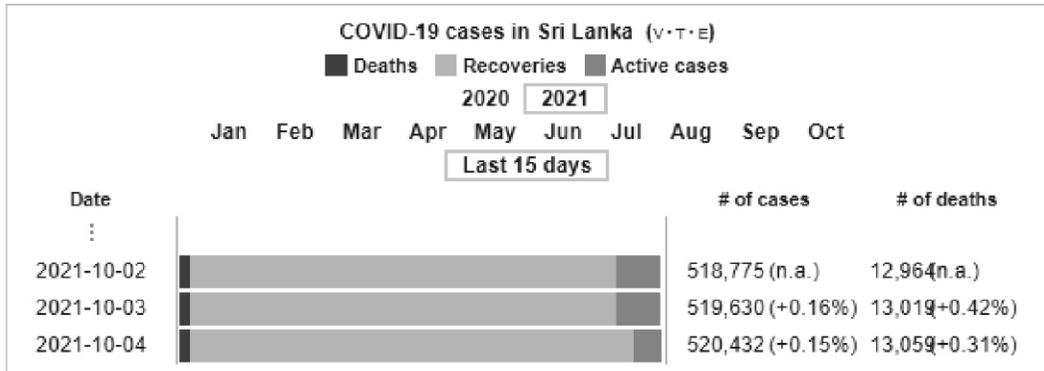


Figure 8: An overview of Covid-19 patients in the past 15 days (Wikipedia.com, 2021)

8.0 Discussion

8.1 Defence Forces of Sri Lanka

When comparing with many countries around the world who struggled with the Covid-19 battle, Sri Lanka can proudly claim the efforts of the government are fruitful. One of the key reasons behind the initial success in combating Covid-19 during the first wave is the rapid actions taken by the government in response to the warnings received by the WHO. The contribution of the defence forces throughout the Covid-19 is highly praiseworthy as they kept providing their continuous outstanding service during each of the Covid-19 waves the country faced.

“Taking up the national responsibility of assisting the battle against Covid-19, Army, Navy and SLAF played a memorable part, alongside the staff of the Ministry of Health (MOH), MOD, Officers at the Western Province Governor, Ministry of Foreign Relations, Sri Lanka Aviation and Airport Authority, Department of Immigration and Emigration, Sri Lanka Police, Sri Lanka Transport Board and other relevant agencies across the country. Analysis of the secondary data proved that all three Defence forces contributed to this immense task of fighting the Covid-19 in their own respective aptitudes” (Jayawardane, 2020).

The Secretary of the Defence Ministry, General Kamal Gunaratne provided leadership to the defence forces during the country’s battle against Covid-19. The Army, Navy, SLAF, State Intelligence Service, Coast Guards as well as the Office of the Chief of Defence Staff operate under the Defence ministry and, with the guidance

of General Kamal Gunaratne's strategic leadership these institutes took extraordinary measures in assisting the government during the Covid-19 battle.

“May it be the ground, air or sea, the presence of medical services is a morale booster for the troops engaged in battle, and military medical personnel are the first respondents not only in the battle but in any sort of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations conducted locally or overseas” stated the Defence Secretary, General Kamal Gunaratne (Defence.lk, 14 March 2020). The adverseness of the second wave was felt by the public when the countrywide travel restrictions were imposed on the 25th of May 2021. The “essential services workers and food vendors were allowed to continue their work, adhering to healthcare guidelines” (Defence.lk, 21 May 2021).

The Defence Secretary, General Gunaratne stated that “Our military has already shown their expertise and professionalism in handling the emergency created under the coronavirus threat” and assured that the defence forces will once again fulfil their duty to conquest the Covid-19 battle. General Gunaratne further reiterated that “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” (Defence.lk)

With the guidance of the President, the defence forces implemented strategic measures to ensure health of the citizens as well as their basic needs such as food was taken care of. The defence forces ensured door to door delivery of medicine, food supplies in order to ensure the well being of the citizens. The “Army, Navy and SLAF jointly enforced travel restrictions between provinces by manning roadblocks and where necessary while simultaneously supporting the Police” (Defence.lk, 17 August 2021).

8.1.1 Contribution from the Sri Lanka Army

The NOCPCO is headed by General Shavendra Silva, Chief of Defence Staff and Commander of the Army (Army.lk, 15 March 2020). Hoping to deliver the best emergency healthcare for Sri Lankan citizens free of charge, Army opened the biggest Covid-19 Hospital in Seeduwa.

This hospital accommodates 1200 beds produced by the Army and is equipped with vital health facilities such as emergency treatment units, Intermediate Care

Centre (ICC), isolation sections, resuscitation units, Intensive Care Unit (ICU) and medical stores. Head of NOCPCO, Chief of Defence Staff and Army Commander General Shavendra Silva stated that the equipment facilities were funded by the generosity of Brandix (Army.lk, 07 May 2021).

Once the island-wide lockdown was declared, the Army immediately took action to strengthen the security of the country and ensure inter province travelling was monitored thoroughly. Army deployed special force riders and infantry soldiers to assist the Police with monitoring public movement (Army.lk 26 May 2021)

The Army reconstructed one of the abandoned buildings of the Morawaka hospital in to an ICC unit to be used for Covid-19 patients (Army.lk, 31 May 2021). “Sri Lanka Army’s 3 Gemunu Watch and Corps of Engineer Services troops established an ICC at Akuesssa Hospital to accommodate 75 patients and formally vested it in hospital authorities recently” (Army.lk, 01 June 2021). Army reconstructed a dilapidated Ward for Covid-19 patients in the Avissawella Base Hospital which will be able to accommodate 40 patients (Army.lk, 03 June 2021).

In Jaffna, the Army troops assisted with the vaccination programme activities of 36 centres across the peninsula. “The vaccination process commenced on May 30 at the Nurses' Training School in Jaffna and the frontline health workers plus civilians received the first dose” (Army.lk 05 June 2021).

Army reconstructed the Kurinchakerny Ayurvedic Hospital, Trincomalee in to an ICC unit in order to treat the Covid-19 patients. “SLA troops of 15 Sri Lanka Light Infantry with the support of healthcare authorities converted the facility to accommodate 70 patients” (Army.lk, 05 June 2021). Army reconstructed the Kundasale Mahamevunawa Buddhist Monastery in to an ICC unit to accommodate 1000 patients and also converted Somerset tea factory in Gampola, Kurunduwatta to serve as an ICC Unit (Army.lk, 14 June 2021).

Army converted the Sri Lanka exhibition and convention centre in Colombo to serve as an ICC unit which will accompany 300 patients (Army.lk, 22 June 2021). Army refurbished an old building at Lunawa hospital in to an ICC Unit (Army.lk, 23 June 2021) and the “troops of 12 Sri Lanka Sinha regiment and 3 Gemunu watch converted the Mapalana agriculture faculty of the Ruhuna University in Matara into a QC on the guidelines given by health authorities” (Army.lk 24, June 2021). Army

reconstructed the youth centre in Bandarawela in to an ICC unit to accommodate 311 patients. (Army.lk, 18 August 2021).

Army took the initiatives to distribute ration packs to civilians. “Army troops under the 59 division of the security forces-Mullaitivu distributed vegetable packs among needy families in Alampil, Vidakarai, Kallapadu, Selvapuram, Wannikulam, Mulliyaweli and Wadduwakkal” (Army.lk, 12 June 2021). Army also distributed ration packs and water bottles to the affected families in Wellampitiya, Kaduwela and Kelanimulla.

With the instructions of the President, His Excellency Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the Army started assisting with the island-wide vaccination program. As a result the Army medical teams “vaccinated over 350 staffers of Maharagama National Institute of Education” giving priority to teachers of the country (Army.lk, 09 July 2021).

In order to start vaccination for people over the age of 30 years a new community vaccination centre was initiated by the Army at the Viharamaha Devi Park Colombo. Another vaccination centre operated at Battaramulla ‘Diyatha Uyana’ along with the newly opened vaccination centre at Werahera (Army.lk, 15 July 2021). From the 01st of August these centres operate round the clock to accelerate the vaccination process. The vaccination centres at Narahenpita Army Hospital, Panagoda Bodhi Rajaramaya (Army Temple) and Werahera Army Medical Corps Camp are operated by the Army for public vaccination along with the vaccination centres at Kelaniya Dharmashoka Vidyalaya, Kadawatha Kirillawala Central College and Negombo Mari Stella College in the Gampaha district (Army.lk 02 August 2021)

The Army contributed in all aspect of the battle against Covid-19 under the strategic leadership of the commanding officers of the defence forces.

8.1.2 Contribution from the Sri Lanka Navy

In order to support the government in the efforts of improving health sector and Covid-19 care centres, Navy contributed in numerous projects which involved in facility expansion and infrastructure improvement. “With the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, Navy came aboard immediately to support the national responsibility by setting up quarantine centres” (Jayawardane, 2020).

A closed factory in Werellawatta, Gampaha was renovated to be an ICC unit which will accommodate 2000 patients (Navy.lk, 02 May 2021). Navy also contributed in the facility expansion in the General Hospital Gampaha with 50 beds, Base Hospital Minuwangoda with 35 beds, Base Hospital in Wathupitiwala with 20 beds and Boossa naval base with 200 beds.

“The Navy is geared to extend its fullest support to the health sector in numerous ways in the time to come, strengthening the government's drive to prevent the transmission of the outbreak of Covid-19. In response to a request made by the MOH, Navy enabled its expertise and manpower under the directives of Commander of the Navy, Vice Admiral Nishantha Ulugetenna for the establishment of these treatment centres (Navy.lk, 04 May 2021).

Navy also built a wastewater treatment plant in Werellawatta premises to enable properly treated water gets released into the environment. Navy coordinated and extended their fullest support in the government's Covid-19 vaccination campaign. Navy deployed two medical teams consisting of naval doctors to carry out the vaccination programmes in the Gampaha District (Navy.lk, 12 May 2021).

Navy with the MOH in Katunayake Export Processing Zone (EPZ) “carried out another inoculation drive to administer ‘Sinopharm’ vaccination to employees of EPZ and a team of naval medical personnel administered 500 Covid-19 jabs to officials of Board of Investment (BOI) as well as employees of 05 factories in the Katunayake Export Processing Zone” (Navy.lk 15 May 2021).

Navy transformed a ward complex of the Kalubowila Teaching Hospital in to a High Dependency Unit and this was done with the Navy’s manpower in support of the GoSL’s battle against Covid-19 (Navy.lk, 16 May 2021).

Navy extended its support in the Covid-19 vaccination programs and conducted the vaccinations in the Lighthouse premises on Chaithya Road Colombo, St Mary's Maha Vidyalaya, Uswetakeiyawa and Elapitiwela Chandrawansa Vidyalaya in Ragama (Navy.lk, 05 July 2021).

Navy was involved with the construction of the new High Dependency Unit (HDU) of Wathupitiwala Base Hospital for the treatment of Covid-19 patients

(Navy.lk, 16 August 2021). This HDU will encompass dedicated equipment for the treatment of COVID-19 patients and has 20 HDU beds.

Navy's Naval Ship (SLNS) Shakthi which went to Port of Chennai, India brought a shipment of medical grade oxygen to Sri Lanka. This oxygen supply was ordered from the Indian government to be used for the treatment of Covid-19 patients.

The female ward of divisional hospital on Nainativu Island, Jaffna was renovated by Navy and was handed over for the use of the Covid-19 and other female patients (Navy.lk, 02 September 2021).

Navy has always pride themselves in supporting the country in any disaster and, during the battle against Covid-19 the strategic leadership exercised by the Navy and the commanding officers of the defence forces undoubtedly delivered an effective accomplishment.

8.1.3 Contribution from the Sri Lanka Air Force

As the number of Covid-19 patients started to increase with the second wave, the Commander of the SLAF, Air Marshal Sudarshana Pathirana began exercising strategic leadership qualities in the fight against the pandemic. The initial measure taken was to facilitate Covid-19 Treatment Centres.

The Civil Engineering directorate of SLAF instigated the construction of a ward complex at the Mulleriyawa Base Hospital for 300 Covid-19 Patients (SLAF.lk, 10 May 2021).

SLAF designed and developed a 'Heated Humidified Oxygen Therapy Unit' (HHOT) under the then Commanding Officer of the General Engineering Wing, Group Captain Indika Wickramasinghe. The HHOT which was innovated to overcome the shortages of ventilators in the country during the Covid-19 battle was officially presented to the President, His Excellency Gotabaya Rajapaksa (SLAF.lk, 12 May 2021). These HHOT units are installed at the National Hospitals, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University Hospital in Werahera and SLAF Hospitals in Colombo and Katunayake.

The HHOT manufactured by the SLAF was also handed over to the Gampaha General Hospital (SLAF.lk, 05 June 2021), District General Hospital in Kalutara

(SLAF.lk, 28 August 2021) Karapitiya Teaching Hospital and National Institute of Infectious Diseases, Angoda (SLAF.lk, 31 August 2021).

SLAF developed a Covid-19 “Vaccination Information Tracker QR Code which is intended to be used for all vaccinated personnel of the SLAF” (SLAF.lk, 29 June 2021). Using this QR Code it is possible to identify personnel who have been vaccinated with information such as type of the vaccination brand and dates of receiving the 1st and 2nd doses.

SLAF launched four vaccination centres to assist the government and they are Thaniyagama Tamil College, Major Raj Fernando Ground at Katunayake, Near Sub Guard Room of SLAF Base Katunayake and Dambuwa Bodhirukkarama Temple located in front of the SLAF Trade Training School at Ekala (SLAF.lk, 05 July 2021).

SLAF also contributed HHOT to health authorities in Tellippalai Base Hospital in Jaffna and Kandy National Hospital (SLAF.lk, 07 October 2021)

SLAF handed over a consignment of medical devices to the Jaffna Teaching Hospital in a bid to assist ongoing Covid-19 treatments which included blood pressure equipment, oxygen cylinders, pulse oximeters, infrared thermometers, non-rebreathe masks and face masks (SLAF.lk, 27 September 2021). The Director, Jaffna Teaching Hospital Dr. T. Sathiyamoorthy appreciated this gesture of SLAF and highly praised the efforts of the defence forces in the battle against Covid-19.

The strategic leadership exercised in the areas of planning, coordinating, innovating and preventing can be precisely identified in the actions of the SLAF under the Command of the SLAF Commander, Air Marshal Sudarshana Pathirana which demonstrates the successful contribution of the defence forces in the battle against Covid-19.

8.2 Support of the Public

When a country is facing a pandemic, the contribution of the public is of paramount importance as the spread is a direct result of the actions of the people. The public contributed positively towards the actions of the defence forces during the first wave, when they exercised hygiene measures and followed the lockdown rules and travel restrictions strictly. When the public disregarded the Covid-19 health regulations and participated in gatherings and avoided safety measures and even

refused vaccination, it brought a negative effect up on the contribution of the defence forces.

The positive influence of the general public also can be seen in the various charitable activities which brought strength to the activities of the defence forces. Founder and chairman of 'Thiyahie' charitable Trust, Mr Vamadeva Thiyagendran, a well-known philanthropist in Jaffna donated Rs. 10 Million to the 'Itukama' fund through General Shavendra Silva, Head of NOCPCO (Army.lk, 26 August 2021).

The founder of the US-based Dharma Vijaya Foundation organization, Ven Dr Walpola Piyananda Nayake Thero and Buddhist Viharaya donated medical devices including telemetry monitors for BP/HR pulses, Oxygen with leads, 10 ltr Oxygen concentrators, Pulse Oximeters worth US \$20,000 to the Head of NOCPCO (Army.lk, 01 July 2021).

The Bishop of Galle, Most Rev. Raymond Wickramasinghe donated medical supplies including Digital Thermo Meters, Pulse Oxi Meters/ Automatic BP Monitors, Nebulizing Equipment, ECG Machines as well as beddings to Commander Southern Naval Area, Rear Admiral Prasanna Hewage (Navy.lk 29, May 2021).

The 1985 batch of Old Boy's Association of Nalanda College donated essential supplies for the use of the ICC for Covid-19 in Boossa (Navy.lk, 03 June 2021). "The Chairman of Crown Royal Holdings (Pvt) Ltd Mr. Ajit Kangara Arachchi handed over a complete three-storeyed house to Commander of the Navy, Vice Admiral Nishantha Ulugetenne, to be used as a Covid-19 Intermediate Care Centre of Sri Lanka Navy" (Navy.lk 23 August 2021).

'Daham Pahana' Foundation provided financial aid worth Rs. 1 million to Sri Lanka Navy to assist the Covid-19 battle (Navy.lk, 13 September 2021). The Bishop of Diocese of Galle, Rt. Rev. Raymond Wickramasinghe provided 50 portable steamers to the Navy in managing Covid-19 (Navy.lk 17 September 2021). The Covid-19 Relief Fund in Brisbane Australia provided 02 Multi Parameter Monitors to the Navy General Hospital worth Rs. 1 million (Navy.lk, 22 September 2021).

8.3 Contribution of the Health Sector

Sri Lanka is proud of its health system which is accessible free of charge to the public. From the beginning of Covid-19, the health sector took all measures to prevent

the disease from spreading and to educate and inform the general public. The Medical officers continuously pressurised the government to impose travel restrictions and, were key contributors in the success of the first wave of the Covid-19 battle. As in any country the experts and experienced staff required for a pandemic almost became a shortfall with the third wave of Covid-19. This required the assistance from the defence forces in vaccination and quarantine procedures.

Defence forces initiated setting up QCs with constructing them and facilitating them with free meals, medicine, WIFI and mindfulness programmes. The health sector required additional support when treating infected patients and defence forces renovated and established ICCs.

The medical staff of the health sector worked with full collaboration with the defence forces in working at these ICCs and helping the patients.

The initial vaccination was started by the health sector on 21st of January 2021. Due to various strikes and trade union actions taken by various professional groups of the health sector, the vaccination program got delayed. As a result the burden fell upon the defence forces to continue the vaccination process. The medical experts of the tri forces joined hands in the vaccination program and ensured the efficiency of the process. “According to official statistics from the Health Ministry, 515,830 vaccines were administered on 07th of October 2021 across the country while in total over 11.2 million doses of vaccine have been administered to date this year” (Xinhua, 2021).

The Defence Secretary, General Kamal Gunaratne stated that “the usual vaccination rate was around 2500 people per day but after the defence forces accelerated the vaccination procedure we administered over 500,000 vaccines per day which was even praised by the WHO”. The strategic leadership of the defence forces contributed to this success as they introduced strategies such as Day Vaccination Centres, 24-hour Vaccination Centres and the Mobile Vaccination Drive to serve the nation as Protectors of the Nation (Defence.lk, 2021).

9. Conclusion

Covid-19 has spread across the globe infecting humans and affecting all living beings. Sri Lanka having faced three waves of the pandemic and successfully claiming victory each time has proudly stated the contribution their defence forces made in the battle against Covid-19.

The objectives of this study is to identify the main areas of strategic leadership exercised by the defence forces of Sri Lanka during the battle against Covid-19, to analyse the impact of the contribution made by the defence forces on Covid-19 and to understand whether external support moderates the strategic leadership exercised by the defence forces on Covid-19.

The study was an analysis from data collected from mainly secondary sources which included official government web sites, international websites, various research reports, books, magazines, newspapers, sources from libraries and journals. Face to face interviews and video conferences were held with relevant commanding personnel of the defence forces to grasp a clearer and in depth understanding. It was evident that the contribution from the defence forces directly impacted the success in battling the Covid-19.

With the literature analysis it was identified that the strategic leadership of the defence forces can be divided in to areas such as planning and organisation, control and coordination, innovation and creation as well as prevention and notification. The support extended by the general public and the health sector has also shown to have an effect on the contribution of defence forces on the final impact of Covid-19. Hence the author created a conceptual model to identify the contribution of the defence forces in the battle against Covid-19. From the data analysis it was identified that the active measures taken by the tri forces fall under the afore-said key components such as planning, coordinating, innovating and preventing. The strategic leadership exercised by the commanding officers of the defence forces displayed these factors when they lead their respective projects.

While living in the new normal way of moving forward with the Covid-19, the protectors of the nation has shown those strategic leadership in numerous developments such as planning and implementing the bio-bubble concept, conducting vaccination programs, building QCs, ICC units, coming up with innovations to fulfil Covid-19 requirements, conducting blood donation campaigns, ensuring well being of public with door to door medicine and ration delivery, assistance to senior citizens with transportation to get their pensions and in home vaccination, disinfection projects as a preventive measure, regular information sharing and enlightening the public and, ensuring quarantine laws are followed by patrolling and road blocking.

The support and involvement of the public and health sector or the lack of it, has also played a key role in the efforts of the defence forces. As identified in the analysis, the positive support from the public and health sector brought progression in their contribution while the drawbacks weakened the efforts.

The discipline, professionalism and the strategic leadership of the defence forces have most certainly contributed to the successful outcome of the Covid-19 battle in Sri Lanka.

10. Recommendations

Effects of Covid-19 will remain around the world for a long period of time and this would open up new needs and requirements for the new normal way of living. It will present many opportunities to introduce innovative products and services and succeed the market. In order to support the growing economy and blossoming industries, the government must provide appropriate support and guidance to cultivate these innovations.

Speaking at the 76th Session of United Nations General Assembly in New York on September 22, President His Excellency Gotabaya Rajapaksa said although still a developing nation, Sri Lanka has been very successful in its vaccination programme (PMD.lk, 22 September 2021). He further reiterated that “We have already fully vaccinated nearly all those above the age of 30. The rapid progress of vaccinations was enabled by coordinated efforts between healthcare workers, Armed Forces and Police personnel, Government servants, and elected officials”. By now 11.73 Million Sri Lankan people have been vaccinated with 31.9 Million of doses. In total 67.3% of the population has received the vaccine. It is recommended that the control measures of Covid-19 to be continued island wide until at least 80% of the population is fully vaccinated.

Sri Lankan economy has suffered a great deal as a result of Covid-19, on top of the tragic loss of lives. Travel restrictions, lockdowns have greatly impacted the country. All sectors need to start functioning and developing in order for the economy to grow. While starting to go back to routine work and life styles, it is extremely important to follow the health guidelines and take all preventive measures as Covid-19 is an invisible enemy.

According to history, many accomplished ventures have started during diastral times, thus, this pandemic should not be seen as an obstacle but in fact an opportunity to develop and grow. WHO has requested every country to create their own “National Deployment and Vaccination Plan for Covid-19” (WHO.com, 08 October 2021). These plans should carry details of all elements of the country’s approach to Covid-19 vaccine rollout. GoSL should develop such a plan with the assistance of the defence forces and ensure their contribution is thoroughly listed and incorporated to that plan. The strategic leadership of the defence forces should be taken in to account when specifying and implementing this plan.

11. Limitations and Future Research

The main limitation of this study is that the major component of the research was undertaken through secondary data analysis. As a qualitative study, the face to face interviews and video conferencing may have had a bias effect on the information provided. The researcher believes that if a certain amount of primary data was also obtained it may have added value to the study.

Even with those limitations, the study shall make a valuable contribution to future studies of Covid-19 and other pandemics. The various unique measures GoSL adopted in the battle against Covid-19 and the innovative, immeasurable support extended by the defence forces which made the most significant contribution in controlling and mitigating the Covid-19 was thoroughly identified in the study.

Research is essential when dealing with an unknown pandemic and therefore, more research studies should be done in order to identify additional and novel ways of dealing with the Covid-19. With the new normal way of living and surviving amidst Covid-19, it is crucial to further investigate the contributions of all parties in the battle against Covid-19 in order to gain a precise guidance in handling the future. As Sri Lanka has proudly beaten the third wave of Covid-19, it will be inspirational for other countries to study the contribution of the defence forces in their respective countries to compare with Sri Lanka to assimilate the positives and drawbacks.

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