

**NEWSLINE***Daily by Faraz***"Questioning
The Answers"**

47 SHIPS, AN AMERICAN WARNING – AND SRI LANKA IN THE MIDDLE

Washington alerts Colombo over Iranian vessels as Sri Lanka monitors 47 ships beyond its territorial waters – while the battle over Hormuz pushes dangerously closer to the Indian Ocean.



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47 SHIPS, AN AMERICAN WARNING - AND SRI LANKA IN THE MIDDLE

Washington alerts Colombo over Iranian vessels as Sri Lanka monitors 47 ships beyond its territorial waters - while the battle over Hormuz pushes dangerously closer to the Indian Ocean

Sri Lanka suddenly finds itself watching an increasingly uncomfortable gathering of ships just beyond its maritime doorstep.

Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath confirmed yesterday that approximately **47 vessels have been identified in international waters close to Sri Lanka's maritime boundary**, as the conflict involving the United States and Iran continues to disrupt shipping across the region.

More significantly, the United States Embassy in Colombo has contacted the Foreign Ministry about the presence of Iranian vessels and asked whether Sri Lankan authorities were aware of them and monitoring their movements.

Herath said the Defence Ministry and Ports Ministry were subsequently informed and that the Sri Lanka Navy is monitoring the vessels.

The Foreign Minister was careful, however, to draw an important legal distinction.

The vessels have not entered Sri Lankan territorial waters. According to Herath, they are positioned in international waters beyond Sri Lanka's territorial jurisdiction. Reports yesterday placed the ships more than 24 nautical miles from Sri Lanka's territorial sea boundary.

Nor are all 47 Iranian.

Herath said the vessels include ships associated with several countries, including Iran, Thailand and Malaysia. Sri Lanka has received no request from the vessels to enter its waters, he said.

But that does not make their presence insignificant.

Only last week the Government disclosed that it was monitoring **11 Iranian vessels south of Galle**, operating beyond Sri Lanka's 12-nautical-mile territorial limit.

The number now being watched is considerably larger, although the Government's latest figure refers to vessels of several nationalities rather than 47 Iranian ships.

The development comes as the maritime confrontation surrounding Iran intensifies.

Traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most important energy corridors, has slowed dramatically. According to Kpler data reported by Reuters, just **seven commodity vessels passed through the Strait on Monday**, following eight the previous day.

Iran has meanwhile threatened retaliation against Gulf energy infrastructure connected to American interests if further US attacks are launched. Tehran has also discussed establishing a new restricted shipping zone and corridor around Hormuz.

For Sri Lanka, these are no longer developments occurring safely on the other side of the Arabian Sea.

The island sits beside one of the world's busiest east-west shipping routes. Any prolonged disruption to Gulf shipping can ultimately arrive here in the price of fuel, freight, insurance and imported goods.

There is also recent history.

In March, Sri Lanka found itself unexpectedly dealing with the human consequences of the conflict after Iranian sailors were rescued following the sinking of an Iranian naval vessel near Sri Lanka. Colombo insisted then that it would act according to international law and would not take sides.

The Government's position today remains essentially the same.

The vessels presently being monitored are outside Sri Lankan territorial waters. They have not requested entry. Sri Lanka therefore has neither the legal authority nor, on the information presently available, a reason to interfere with them merely because they are there.

But Washington's approach to Colombo changes the complexion of the story.

The question is no longer simply why Iranian vessels are congregating in the wider waters around Sri Lanka.

It is what the United States knows about them that prompted it to contact Colombo.

Were the Americans merely checking whether Sri Lanka was aware of the vessels? Was specific intelligence shared? Are particular ships among the 47 of interest to Washington?

And has Sri Lanka been asked to do anything beyond monitoring them?

Those questions deserve answers.

Sri Lanka has neither the military interest nor the economic luxury to become a participant in somebody else's war. Its obligation is to protect its territory, its shipping interests and its neutrality while complying with international law.

That balancing act could become considerably harder if the confrontation around Hormuz continues moving eastwards.

For the moment, 47 vessels remain outside Sri Lanka's territorial waters.

The Sri Lanka Navy is watching them.

And, apparently, so is Washington.

UNDER 16? FAISZER SAYS KEEP THEM OFF SOCIAL MEDIA

Faiszer Musthapha PC MP takes the battle over children's online safety to Parliament, calling for urgent restrictions on social-media access for those under 16 while insisting the proposal is about protecting children, not opposing technology

NEWSLINE | CURRENT AFFAIRS

MP Faiszer Musthapha PC has urged Parliament to move quickly towards restricting social-media access for children under 16, warning that unrestricted exposure is creating increasingly serious consequences for their safety, mental wellbeing, education and development.

Moving an adjournment motion in Parliament yesterday, Musthapha sought to push the issue beyond discussion and towards legislation, arguing that Sri Lanka should learn from countries already moving to impose minimum-age requirements on the world's largest social-media platforms.

The intervention follows his earlier Private Member's Bill seeking to establish 16 as the minimum age for social-media access in Sri Lanka. The proposed framework would place responsibility not merely on children and their parents but on the technology companies providing the platforms.

Musthapha pointed to international developments, including Australia's move to impose a social-media minimum age of 16 and measures being considered elsewhere. His central argument was that Sri Lanka need not wait for the social consequences of unrestricted childhood access to become still more serious before acting.

The proposal would affect major social-media services used extensively by young people, including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube and X, while distinguishing social-media platforms from essential communication services.

Musthapha was also at pains to reject the suggestion that such restrictions amount to an anti-technology position. The internet has become indispensable to education, communication and everyday life, particularly for a generation that has grown up with smartphones in their hands.

The concern is instead about platforms deliberately designed to maximise engagement and keep users watching, scrolling, clicking and returning. If adults themselves struggle to control the amount of time they spend on these platforms, expecting children to possess greater resistance is hardly realistic.

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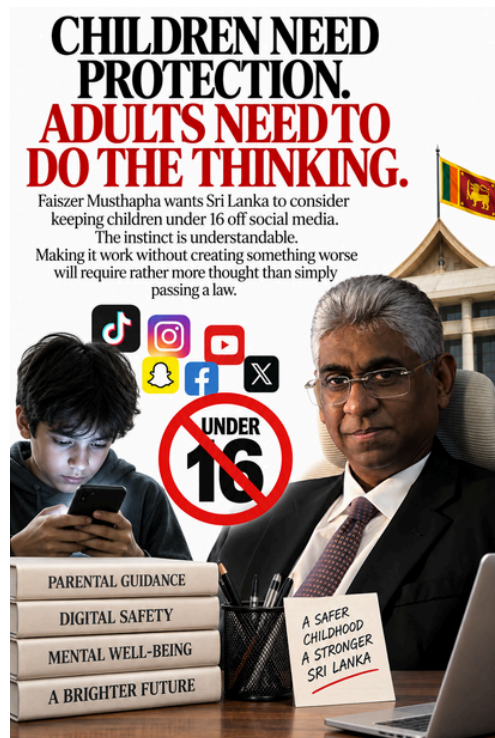
UNDER 16? ...

There are nevertheless difficult questions Parliament will have to answer before converting the principle into workable law. Establishing a minimum age is considerably easier than establishing how that age will be reliably verified.

Requiring identification documents, facial-age estimation or other verification mechanisms immediately raises questions about privacy and the collection and storage of personal information.

A law designed to protect children must not inadvertently create a mechanism through which every Sri Lankan using social media is required to surrender unnecessary personal data.

There is also the practical reality that simply asking a child to enter a date of birth is unlikely to achieve very much. Any credible system will therefore have to place meaningful obligations on the platforms themselves rather than pretending that determined teenagers will police their own access.



That is where the debate becomes important. The question is no longer simply whether parents should supervise their children.

It is whether enormously profitable global technology companies should carry a greater legal responsibility for protecting the children using products specifically engineered to hold their attention.

Sri Lanka must also ensure that legitimate child protection does not become an excuse for broader State control of the internet. Protecting children and protecting freedom of expression and privacy are not mutually exclusive objectives, but badly drafted legislation could easily place them in conflict.

Musthapha has nevertheless put an important issue squarely before Parliament. Cyberbullying, harmful content, online exploitation and compulsive social-media use are not problems that disappear because legislation is difficult.

The principle is relatively straightforward: children deserve protection in the digital world just as they do in the physical one. The real test for Parliament will be devising a system that actually provides that protection without creating another cumbersome regulatory machine or unnecessarily intruding into the privacy of everyone else.

Be that as it may, doing nothing is also a decision.

And with children spending an ever greater part of their lives online, it may increasingly be the least defensible one.

22A: NOW THERE IS ANOTHER QUESTION

Eight petitions challenging the 22nd Amendment were apparently not listed for hearing. Two petitioners now want to know why, as concerns over the process surrounding the controversial constitutional amendment refuse to go away

NEWSLINE | CURRENT AFFAIRS

The controversy surrounding the proposed 22nd Amendment has taken another turn, with questions now being raised over how eight petitions challenging the constitutional amendment were apparently not listed for hearing before the Supreme Court.

Two petitioners have moved the Supreme Court seeking an explanation and an opportunity to examine relevant Registry and parliamentary records to establish how petitions which they say were properly filed and registered came not to be heard with the others.

The Registrar of the Supreme Court, Secretary General of Parliament, Speaker and Attorney General have been named as respondents in the action.

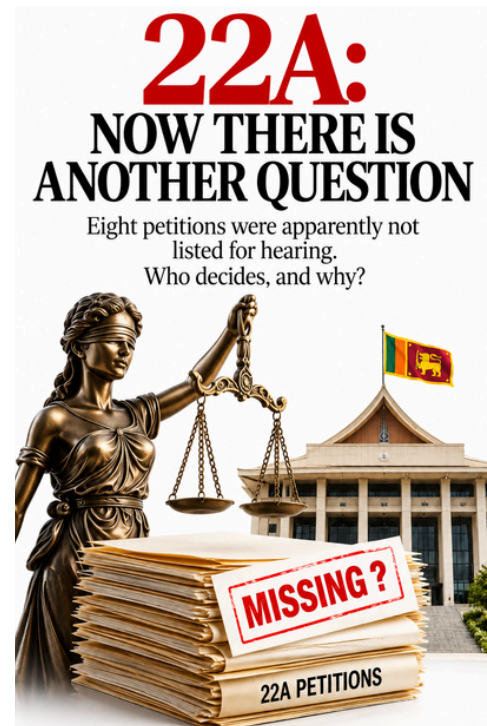
Opposition Leader Sajith Premadasa raised the issue in Parliament yesterday, arguing that every person who properly invoked the constitutional process to challenge the Bill should have been afforded an opportunity to be heard.

It adds another layer to a 22A process which was already attracting scrutiny over the composition of the five-member Supreme Court bench and the procedure adopted in hearing the challenges.

The Commonwealth Lawyers Association has separately raised concerns over aspects of the proceedings, including the composition of the bench, the non-inclusion of some senior Supreme Court judges, the refusal of a request for a fuller bench and issues surrounding opportunities to make oral submissions.

Justice Minister Harshana Nanayakkara responded in Parliament by pointing out that the Commonwealth Lawyers Association is not an official body of the Commonwealth Secretariat but a private membership organisation.

He nevertheless acknowledged that it undertakes constructive work.



That, however, does not answer the central procedural question now being raised.

The Constitution provides citizens with a narrow window in which to challenge Bills before the Supreme Court. In the case of a constitutional amendment, that right assumes still greater importance because the Court must determine whether Parliament alone can enact the proposed change or whether approval of the People at a referendum is also required.

If a petition was properly filed within the prescribed period, registered and accepted by the Registry, the question of why it did not subsequently reach the hearing therefore deserves a clear answer.

An administrative error, if that is what occurred, is not necessarily evidence of anything more sinister. Courts, registries and public institutions are operated by human beings and mistakes can happen.

But constitutional litigation is precisely where procedural confidence matters most. The answer to questions about process is not speculation, accusation or defensiveness. It is transparency.

There is also a larger issue surrounding 22A. The proposed extension of the retirement ages of judges has already generated an unusually intense debate about judicial independence, transitional arrangements and whether any benefit should extend to judges presently holding office.



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22A...

NewsLine has consistently maintained that the central constitutional distinction is between a prospective change applying to future office-holders and a retrospective or transitional arrangement capable of altering the tenure of those already occupying judicial office.

That is ultimately a matter for constitutional determination, not political convenience.

The latest controversy is different. It concerns whether citizens who exercised their constitutional right to challenge the Bill were actually afforded the hearing that right was supposed to provide.

The easiest way to protect confidence in the judiciary is therefore also the simplest.

Establish what happened to the eight petitions, explain it publicly and, if an error occurred, say so.

The independence of the judiciary is too important to be defended through silence.

Be that as it may, when the Constitution gives a citizen a door through which to challenge constitutional change, that door must not merely exist.

It must open.

GENEVA: SOME PRAISE, BUT THE QUESTIONS HAVE NOT GONE AWAY

The UN Human Rights Office acknowledges progress in several Sri Lankan investigations and reforms but warns that deeper change risks losing momentum, while Colombo insists accountability must remain nationally owned

NEWSLINE | CURRENT AFFAIRS

Sri Lanka returned to familiar territory in Geneva yesterday, but this time the picture presented to the United Nations Human Rights Council was more complicated than the familiar confrontation between Colombo and its international critics.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights acknowledged important progress in several high-profile investigations, corruption-related reforms and human-rights initiatives while warning that momentum towards deeper legal and institutional reform appeared to be slowing.

The assessment was presented as the Human Rights Council began its 63rd regular session in Geneva, which runs from September 7 to October 7.

Among the positive developments identified were renewed movement in investigations and prosecutions involving several emblematic cases linked to alleged political killings and enforced disappearances.

That matters because successive Sri Lankan governments have repeatedly been criticised for investigations which

begin dramatically, attract enormous publicity and then disappear into the administrative distance.

But Geneva's message was that individual prosecutions cannot substitute for a broader and credible process capable of addressing unresolved allegations, disappearances and longstanding concerns over accountability.

The Sri Lankan Government responded by emphasising that investigations into several significant cases have been reopened and that reforms are continuing across the justice, prison and institutional systems.



Sri Lanka's Permanent Representative in Geneva, Ambassador Sumith Dassanayake, reaffirmed the Government's commitment to reconciliation and accountability through nationally owned processes while rejecting the external evidence-gathering mechanism established under previous Human Rights Council resolutions.

That position is not new. Sri Lankan governments of markedly different political complexions have objected to international mechanisms which they argue intrude upon national sovereignty and undermine domestic processes.

The international response remains equally familiar: domestic mechanisms must demonstrate that they are capable of producing credible results.

The Sri Lanka Core Group at the Council welcomed positive developments but called for further action on accountability and reconciliation, drawing attention to unresolved enforced disappearances, mass graves and reports involving intimidation or restrictions affecting civil society, journalists and victims' groups.

The Government, for its part, wants its progress measured objectively rather than through what it regards as a permanently adverse international narrative.

There is merit in demanding balance. Sri Lanka should receive credit where investigations genuinely move forward, prosecutions are brought and institutions improve.

But there is an equally simple test for Colombo.

The most convincing answer to Geneva has never been another speech in Geneva. It is demonstrable justice in Sri Lanka.

If allegations are false, credible investigations should establish that. If evidence supports prosecution, cases should proceed without political interference, selective enthusiasm or interminable delay.

Accountability cannot sensibly mean that every allegation automatically becomes guilt. Neither can sovereignty mean that difficult allegations simply disappear with the passage of time.

The Government therefore has an opportunity that several of its predecessors squandered: to make the international argument increasingly irrelevant by building domestic institutions sufficiently independent and effective to command confidence themselves.

That would be considerably more powerful than another decade of resolutions, counter-resolutions and diplomatic speeches.

Be that as it may, Geneva is looking at Sri Lanka again.

What it sees next will depend rather more upon what happens in Colombo than upon what Sri Lanka says in Geneva.

WHO GETS TO DECIDE WHO IS A JOURNALIST?

Supreme Court finds provisions of proposed Chartered Institute of Media Professionals Bill inconsistent with the Constitution, raising a much larger question about who should have the power to define, regulate or credential journalism

NEWSLINE | CURRENT AFFAIRS

Who decides who is a journalist?

It sounds like a simple question until Parliament attempts to provide the answer.

The Supreme Court has determined that several provisions of the proposed Chartered Institute of Media Professionals of Sri Lanka (Incorporation) Bill are inconsistent with the Constitution and would require amendment or, in certain circumstances, a special majority in Parliament to become law.

The Court's determination was announced to Parliament yesterday by the Speaker.

Among the constitutional concerns identified were provisions affecting equality before the law and the

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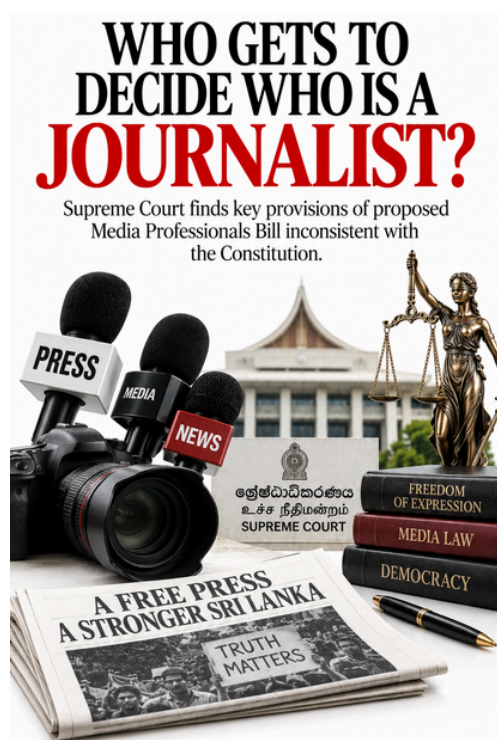


WHO GETS TO DECIDE...

freedom to engage in a lawful occupation, profession, trade, business or enterprise.

The Bill proposes establishing a professional body for people working across journalism, broadcasting, digital media and related fields, with objectives including professional development, training, ethical standards and recognition of media practitioners.

Those objectives, considered alone, are hardly controversial. Journalism desperately needs professionalism, ethical standards, training and accountability, just as the public is entitled to expect accuracy and responsibility from those who claim to inform it.



The difficulty begins when professional recognition risks becoming professional permission.

Journalism is not medicine. Nor is it engineering or accountancy. A person does not require a State-issued licence before asking a Minister a question, investigating the expenditure of public money or publishing evidence of wrongdoing.

That distinction becomes even more important in the digital age.

A reporter employed by a newspaper is plainly a journalist. But what about an independent investigative reporter working through YouTube? A documentary maker? A freelance photographer? A citizen who uncovers corruption and publishes the evidence online?

Any statutory structure which effectively creates an approved class of journalists therefore needs extraordinarily careful scrutiny.

Professional associations can perform valuable functions. They can establish standards, provide training, defend journalists and encourage ethical conduct.

But the moment membership, accreditation or certification becomes a gateway to exercising journalism, the relationship between the press and the State begins to change.

There is another side to the argument which should not be ignored.

Sri Lanka's media landscape includes genuine problems of misinformation, political propaganda masquerading as journalism, character assassination and social-media operators who publish allegations without elementary verification.

Freedom of expression does not relieve journalists of responsibility for what they publish. Existing laws relating to defamation, contempt, privacy and criminal conduct remain capable of applying where appropriate.

The solution, however, must not become more dangerous than the problem.

A democratic State should be extremely reluctant to decide who qualifies to scrutinise that democratic State.

The Supreme Court determination does not necessarily kill the proposed Institute. Parliament can amend the offending provisions and construct a body which promotes professional standards without creating unconstitutional restrictions.

Indeed, a voluntary professional institution with credible standards and genuine independence could strengthen journalism.

The line that must not be crossed is equally clear.

Journalists should be accountable for their journalism.

They should not require permission to practise it.

Be that as it may, whenever the State starts defining who may properly question the State, the media should start asking rather more questions.

HALF FULL - AND FALLING

Reservoir levels are slipping, water restrictions are appearing and El Niño threatens a difficult dry period. Sri Lanka has been warned. The question now is whether somebody has actually prepared for it

NEWSLINE | CURRENT AFFAIRS

Sri Lanka's reservoirs are moving towards an uncomfortable number.

Water storage in the country's major reservoirs has fallen towards approximately half of overall capacity as dry conditions begin to place increasing pressure on drinking-water supplies, agriculture and electricity generation.

Restrictions and interruptions to water supplies have

already begun affecting some areas, while authorities are urging consumers to conserve water as the dry spell continues.

The immediate problem is rainfall. The larger problem is what happens if insufficient rainfall continues.

El Niño conditions have increased concern that Sri Lanka could experience a more prolonged dry period, with potentially significant consequences for agriculture and hydroelectricity generation.

For farmers, timing is critical. Cultivation decisions made now determine how much water will be required weeks and months later, when reservoir levels could be considerably lower.

Agricultural authorities therefore face the difficult task of balancing cultivation requirements against a water resource that must also provide drinking water and contribute to electricity generation.

Sri Lanka has been here before.

Extended dry weather reduces hydroelectric output and forces the electricity system to rely more heavily upon thermal generation. That in turn means greater consumption of imported fuel and a potentially larger foreign-exchange bill.

This time there is an additional complication.

Oil markets are already nervous because of the escalating confrontation involving Iran and the United States and the disruption surrounding the Strait of Hormuz. A prolonged regional crisis could increase the cost of the very fuel Sri Lanka would need if hydroelectric generation falls sharply.



That makes water and energy planning part of the same problem.

The Government has indicated that it is examining additional generation and contingency measures. What matters now is whether those arrangements can be deployed before an emergency rather than after one.

Sri Lankans remember what happens when warnings are treated as tomorrow's problem.

The country does not need alarmism. Reservoirs approaching half capacity do not mean the taps are about to run dry or that power cuts are inevitable.

They do, however, mean that the margin for complacency is becoming smaller.

Authorities should therefore be publishing clear information on reservoir storage, projected drinking-

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THE DROUGHT...

water requirements, agricultural allocations, expected hydroelectric output and the additional thermal capacity available if conditions deteriorate.

That information would allow the public to understand the seriousness of the situation without either panic or political spin.

Water conservation must also begin before shortages become acute. Asking consumers to conserve water after reservoirs have reached critical levels is rather like looking for an umbrella after becoming thoroughly wet.

Sri Lanka has had enough experience with drought, fuel shortages and electricity crises to know how quickly one problem can become three.

There is still time to manage this one.

Be that as it may, the clouds are under no obligation to rescue poor planning.

That remains the Government's job.

HORMUZ: THE TEMPERATURE JUST WENT UP AGAIN

Shipping through the world's most important oil chokepoint has slowed dramatically as Iran threatens retaliation and Gulf energy infrastructure comes under attack. For Sri Lanka, a crisis more than 3,000 kilometres away could soon be measured at the fuel pump.

NEWSLINE | WORLD WATCH

Shipping through the Strait of Hormuz has slowed sharply as the confrontation involving Iran and the United States intensifies, raising fears of a prolonged disruption to one of the world's most important energy corridors. Commodity-vessel traffic through the Strait fell to just seven vessels on Monday, following only eight the previous day, as shipowners increasingly weigh the risks of entering the Gulf.

The numbers matter because Hormuz is no ordinary shipping lane. Roughly a fifth of global petroleum liquids consumption normally passes through the narrow waterway connecting the Gulf's major oil and gas producers with markets across Asia and the rest of the world, meaning that even a partial disruption can affect oil prices, freight rates and marine insurance.

Iran has warned that further American attacks could provoke retaliation against US-linked energy interests in the Gulf and has spoken of establishing a new restricted maritime zone and controlled shipping corridor around Hormuz. The confrontation has meanwhile widened, with Iran-aligned Houthi forces attacking targets in Saudi Arabia, including energy infrastructure, and dozens of people reported injured in attacks on southern Saudi cities.

The danger for energy markets is therefore no longer confined to whether Iran physically closes the Strait. A broader conflict threatening oil production, processing facilities, tankers and export infrastructure across the Gulf could make ordinary commercial shipping increasingly expensive and unpredictable even while Hormuz technically remains open.

Oil prices have responded, with Brent crude again moving towards the psychologically important US\$100-a-barrel level. Alternative pipelines, export routes and available global inventories have so far helped prevent a still more dramatic price surge, but those alternatives cannot completely replace the enormous volume of energy normally carried through Hormuz.



For Sri Lanka, this is where a distant geopolitical confrontation becomes a domestic economic issue. The country imports most of the petroleum it consumes, leaving fuel prices, electricity generation and transport costs exposed to movements in international energy markets.

A tanker does not have to be sunk for its cargo to become more expensive. Higher war-risk insurance, freight charges, delayed deliveries and shipowners unwilling to enter dangerous waters can eventually be reflected in the price paid by an importing country thousands of kilometres away.

There is also the foreign-exchange consequence. Sri Lanka has spent several difficult years rebuilding reserves and stabilising an economy that experienced first-hand what happens when dollars become scarce and fuel becomes difficult to obtain, and a substantially higher petroleum import bill would inevitably place additional pressure on that recovery.

The country's exposure goes beyond oil. The Middle East remains an important destination for Sri Lankan workers and source of remittances, while Gulf aviation routes, tourism, shipping and trade connect Sri Lanka closely to

a region in which instability can rapidly produce economic consequences elsewhere.

There is now an additional Sri Lankan dimension. The Government says 47 vessels are being monitored in international waters around the island after the United States alerted Colombo regarding Iranian vessels operating in the region.

The 47 are not all Iranian and include vessels associated with several countries, while the Government maintains that they remain outside Sri Lankan territorial waters and have made no request to enter.

Their presence nevertheless demonstrates how the maritime consequences of the Gulf confrontation are spreading into the wider Indian Ocean.

The shipping routes emerging from Hormuz eventually cross the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean, placing Sri Lanka close to one of the principal arteries connecting Gulf energy with Asian markets.

Colombo's sensible position is to remain outside somebody else's military confrontation while protecting Sri Lankan territory, shipping interests and economic security. That requires considerably more than watching television pictures of events in the Gulf and hoping the crisis passes.

The Government should already know how much petroleum Sri Lanka physically holds, what quantities are contracted and in transit, how exposed the country would be to a prolonged price increase and what alternative supply arrangements exist if normal Gulf shipping becomes seriously disrupted.

Those are questions of contingency planning, not reasons for consumers to panic or begin forming another national collection of plastic fuel cans.

Sri Lanka learnt in 2022 how quickly an energy problem can become an economic and social crisis when foreign exchange, fuel supplies and public confidence collapse together.

The country's economic position today is considerably stronger than it was then, but its geography and dependence on imported energy have not changed.

Be that as it may, Hormuz does not have to close for Sri Lanka to feel the consequences.

If ships become more expensive to insure, cargoes more difficult to move and oil more expensive to buy, the distance between the Strait of Hormuz and a Sri Lankan petrol pump can become remarkably short.

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CHILDREN NEED PROTECTION. ADULTS NEED TO DO THE THINKING.

Faiszer Musthapha wants Sri Lanka to consider keeping children under 16 off social media. The instinct is understandable. Making it work without creating something worse will require rather more thought than simply passing a law.

NEWSLINE | EDITORIAL

There was a time when parents worried about where their children were after dark. Today the child can be safely inside the bedroom while much of the world, including some distinctly unpleasant corners of it, is sitting beside them on a six-inch screen.

Faiszer Musthapha PC has brought that uncomfortable reality into Parliament, calling for restrictions on social-media access for children under 16. It is an idea worth taking seriously because cyberbullying, sexual exploitation, harmful content, compulsive scrolling and the effects of constant online comparison are no longer theoretical dangers discussed by worried adults who simply do not understand technology.



The technology companies understand it extremely well. Some of the world's most valuable businesses have become extraordinarily good at learning what keeps human beings looking at screens, and children are encountering that machinery long before they have developed the judgement necessary to understand what is being done to their attention.

There is therefore nothing particularly radical about asking whether companies making billions from engagement should carry greater responsibility for protecting children using their products. Society does not ordinarily allow an industry to answer every concern about children by pointing towards the parents and walking away.

But Parliament should resist its own favourite temptation: believing that passing a law and solving a problem are the same thing. Declaring that nobody under 16 may use social media is easy; establishing whether the person holding the telephone is 15 or 51 without

constructing an intrusive identification system for the entire population is considerably harder.

That is where good intentions can become bad legislation. Protecting children must not provide a convenient excuse for creating a national internet identity system, unnecessarily collecting personal information or expanding State control over what adults may read, watch and say online.

There are practical questions too. Children use the internet for school, research, communication and entertainment, while the boundary between a social-media platform, messaging service, video platform and educational resource becomes less obvious every year.

A law written for yesterday's technology could be obsolete before the ink on the Gazette is dry.

The responsibility must therefore be shared. Technology companies must design genuinely effective protections, parents must remain parents, schools must teach digital

literacy and the State must establish sensible boundaries without appointing itself everyone's online nanny.

Musthapha deserves credit for putting the subject before Parliament because doing nothing is not a neutral position. Leaving children alone against algorithms designed by some of the world's cleverest engineers to capture attention is itself a policy choice, and not an especially convincing one.

Sri Lanka should proceed, but carefully. Protect the child, preserve privacy, make the platforms carry their share of the burden and ensure that legislation aimed at a 14-year-old does not quietly become surveillance of a 40-year-old.

Be that as it may, perhaps there is one social-media restriction Parliament could introduce immediately without waiting for another Bill.

MPs might occasionally put their own phones down and listen to each other.

Rajeeva
Bandaranaike
Chairman,
Data Protection
Authority (DPA)
CEO Colombo Stock
Exchange

Key Note Speaker

"Protecting Personal
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What Every Sri Lankan
Business Needs to
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