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"Questioning The Answers"

160,000 CANCER INJECTIONS ARE HERE – SO WHY CAN'T PATIENTS HAVE THEM?

NEWSLINE SPECIAL REPORT

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Issue No. 375 14th SEPTEMBER 2026 CEYLON INDEPENDENT @+94 77 230 0305

NEWSLINE
Daily by Faraz
"Questioning The Answers"

CANCER DOES NOT WAIT. THE MEDICINE IS HERE. WHAT IS HOLDING IT UP?

A cancer medicine shortage. Around 160,000 pre-filled Filgrastim syringes sitting in quarantine. A dispute principally over labelling. Yet the manufacturer, product, importer, shipment and batches can apparently all be traced and the medicine can be independently tested. NEWSLINE asks why cancer patients are still waiting.

NEWSLINE INVESTIGATION

Around 160,000 pre-filled syringes of Filgrastim remain unavailable to Sri Lanka's cancer patients while the Regulator grapples principally with a labelling problem. There is no argument that pharmaceutical labelling matters: it is an essential part of ensuring that medicines are properly identified, traced and safely used.

But there is an increasingly important distinction between a labelling defect and an inability to establish the identity, quality and provenance of a medicine. If the identity of these syringes can be traced through their batch numbers, reconciled with their outer packaging and import documentation, authenticated by the manufacturer and finally confirmed through independent analytical testing, NEWSLINE asks why that process has not been pursued with considerably greater urgency.

World Health Organization guidance identifies a range of information relevant to pharmaceutical labelling, including, as appropriate, the product name, active ingredient and amount, batch number, expiry date, storage and handling requirements, directions and warnings, and the identity of the manufacturer or supplier. WHO guidance also recognises the distinction between primary packaging containing or immediately enclosing the medicine and the secondary or outer packaging.

That distinction goes to the heart of the Filgrastim controversy. NEWSLINE understands that the individual outer carton identifies the medicine as Filgrastim and carries the required product particulars, while the blister or primary packaging of the pre-filled syringe carries the strength, manufacturing date, expiry date and batch number but does not separately state the generic name Filgrastim.

That omission is the apparent labelling defect which finds its origin in the approval garnted by one government agency namely the SPC State Pharmaceutical Corporation - and should not simply be brushed aside. The question, however, is whether it renders the medicine unidentifiable, particularly when WHO itself places considerable importance on batch information as a means of pharmaceutical traceability and advises that batch numbers and expiry dates on primary packaging should be checked against those appearing on secondary packaging.

NEWSLINE therefore asked the manufacturer whether the batch number printed on the primary packaging could be traced through its production records to establish the identity of the medicine. The manufacturer's answer was yes, and it explained to NEWSLINE how its batch-coding system operates.

Take, for example, the batch number **GA202606017** appearing on the primary packaging. According to the manufacturer, **GA** identifies the product as Filgrastim; **2026** identifies the year of manufacture; **06** identifies the month of manufacture, June; while **017** is the serial component of the batch number, which changes with production according to the manufacturer's annual coding sequence.

If that explanation is correct, GA202606017 is not simply a random collection of letters and numbers. It is a coded product and manufacturing identifier which, according to the manufacturer, can be traced directly through its production records.

That is significant because although the word Filgrastim does not appear on the primary packaging, the manufacturer says the letters **GA** contained within the batch number themselves identify the product as Filgrastim.

The Regulator does not have to accept that explanation on trust; it can require the manufacturer formally to decode the complete batch number and produce the corresponding manufacturing and batch records.

The Regulator can establish whether GA does indeed identify Filgrastim, whether 2026 corresponds with the manufacturing year, whether 06 represents June and whether 017 corresponds with the appropriate production sequence. It can then compare that complete batch identification against the individual outer carton, Certificate of Analysis and the Regulatory customs and shipping documentation accompanying the consignment. There are several other layers of traceability.

This medicine did not arrive anonymously in Sri Lanka or emerge from an unidentified supplier: there is a manufacturer registered within Sri Lanka's regulatory system, a manufacturing site subject to regulatory requirements and aRegulator registered product with marketing authorisation.

There is also an authorised Sri Lankan local agent, an established pharmaceutical importer carrying its own regulatory responsibilities. The medicine was imported through official channels for supply to the State health sector, requiring the appropriate product registration, The Regulator's import authorisation and accompanying commercial, customs and shipping documentation.

NEWSLINE understands that the manufacturer has confirmed that this particular consignment was supplied to Sri Lanka through its authorised local agent.

NEWSLINE further learns that the same manufacturer has previously supplied **more than 225,000 pre-filled syringes of Filgrastim to the Sri Lankan Government**, meaning that there should already be a substantial regulatory, importation, batch and pharmacovigilance history against which the present consignment can be compared.

The Regulator therefore has several separate means of establishing the identity and provenance of these syringes.

It can establish what the registered manufacturer produced and exported, what the authorised Sri Lankan agent ordered and imported, and whether the batch identification on the primary packaging corresponds with the batch number and product identification on the outer carton.

Those numbers can in turn be reconciled against the Certificate of Analysis, manufacturer's production records, product registration, import licence and shipping documentation.

Sri Lanka Customs and the Regulator can additionally cross-check relevant import documentation through the official customs and regulatory systems, including ASYCUDA where applicable.

If there is a break anywhere in that chain, identify it. If the batch numbers do not correspond, if GA202606017 cannot be traced to Filgrastim, or if the manufacturer's records do not reconcile with the product that arrived in Sri Lanka, those would be serious matters requiring investigation.

But if that documentary trail does reconcile, there remains an even more important safeguard available to the Regulator : independent scientific testing. NEWSLINE understands that the importer is prepared to bear the cost of sending representative samples to an appropriately accredited independent laboratory capable of carrying out the necessary analytical tests.

If there is doubt that these syringes contain Filgrastim, establish scientifically whether they contain Filgrastim. If there is doubt about the strength, test it; if there are concerns about quality, purity, sterility or other applicable specifications, undertake whatever validated analyses the Regulator considers necessary.

If the product fails those tests, do not release it. If the documentation does not reconcile or there is credible evidence that the medicine is counterfeit, substituted, contaminated, keep it away from patients.

That is precisely what medicines regulation is supposed to achieve.

But the reverse must surely also apply: if independent analytical evidence confirms the identity, strength and required quality of the medicine, the manufacturer authenticates the batch, the batch number on the primary packaging corresponds with the outer carton and the Regulatory and shipping documentation establishes its provenance, the Regulator should explain what remaining patient-safety concern prevents it from considering an appropriate regulatory mechanism for release.

Strip away the arguments between institutions and consider what is already before the Regulator .

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"Questioning The Answers"

CANCER DOES NOT WAIT...

There is a Regulator - recognised manufacturer, a Regulator - registered Filgrastim product, an authorised Sri Lankan agent, an official importation, a manufacturer confirming the shipment, an outer carton identifying Filgrastim and primary packaging carrying the strength, manufacturing date, expiry date and a batch number which, according to the manufacturer, itself encodes the identity and production history of the medicine.

There is also a manufacturer which has previously supplied more than 225,000 pre-filled Filgrastim syringes to the Government, and an importer now prepared to pay for independent analytical testing.

None of those facts makes the apparent omission of the generic name from the primary packaging disappear, but neither should a labelling defect automatically be treated as evidence that a medicine is unsafe, counterfeit or incapable of identification.

The NMRA is Sri Lanka's medicines regulator. Its responsibility is not merely to identify a regulatory breach but to determine what that breach means for the quality, safety and efficacy of the medicine and, ultimately, for the patient.

There is no justification for compromising patient safety in order to get these syringes into hospitals. There is equally no justification for bureaucracy becoming a substitute for science when a desperately needed cancer medicine is already sitting in Sri Lanka.

Trace GA202606017 through the manufacturer's records. Match it against the outer carton, Certificate of Analysis, import licence and shipping documentation; obtain formal authentication directly from the registered manufacturer and take representative samples under proper regulatory control for independent analytical testing.

Then decide.

The issue is therefore no longer simply whether there is a labelling defect. There plainly appears to be one.

The far more important question is why, after all this time, Sri Lanka still does not have the definitive scientific answer needed to decide whether 160,000 syringes can reach the cancer patients waiting for them.

A complex product – immunoglobulin - had in the recent past regulatory compliance issues. One had correct labelling with no deaths. The other with correct labelling with deaths and multiple reactions.

Both were assessed by the Regulator, in the interest of the patient. One was subject to a total product recall. The other was recalled, revoked in the interest of the patient.

NewsLine has the information pertaining to both instances.

The complex product - Filgrastim - which has as its issue a labelling deficiency – which"Kanthi" is very much expecting to be resolved soon – so she can hopefully live at least a day longer.

Be that as it may.

WE ARE EARNING MORE DOLLARS. SO WHY ARE WE BACK IN THE RED?

Sri Lanka's current account has reportedly slipped into deficit for a fourth consecutive month. Imports are climbing, the trade gap is widening and fuel and vehicles are consuming billions of dollars. The crisis may be behind us but some of the habits that helped create it appear to be returning.

NEWSLINE

Sri Lanka spent the past few years painfully rebuilding its external finances after the country effectively ran out of usable foreign exchange. Reserves were rebuilt, imports were controlled, the rupee stabilised and the current account moved into surplus. Now some of those numbers are beginning to move in the opposite direction.

The current account recorded a deficit of around **US$142 million in July**, according to figures reported from Central Bank data, making it the fourth consecutive monthly deficit. For the first seven months of the year, the cumulative current-account position was reportedly approximately **US$387 million in deficit**, compared with a surplus during the corresponding period last year.

The more striking number may be the merchandise trade deficit. It reportedly widened from approximately **US$3.9 billion during January–July last year to about US$6.5 billion in the same period this year**. That is an increase of roughly US$2.6 billion in seven months.

Fuel has played a substantial part. Sri Lanka's fuel import bill for the first seven months reportedly climbed to around US$3.62 billion, almost 60 per cent higher than a year earlier. Vehicle imports, restored after years of restrictions, accounted for approximately another US$1.5 billion.

None of this means Sri Lanka is about to repeat 2022. The circumstances are substantially different, foreign reserves have recovered and the economy has undergone painful fiscal and monetary adjustment. But the figures do raise a question that should not be dismissed merely because today's position is stronger than it was four years ago.

Sri Lanka's problem was never simply that it did not earn dollars. It was also extraordinarily good at spending them.

The reopening of vehicle imports was necessary at some point and fuel imports cannot simply be wished away. A recovering economy will naturally import more machinery, intermediate goods, consumer products and energy. Rising imports can therefore be evidence of economic activity rather than economic failure.

But that makes the composition of those imports crucial. If additional foreign exchange is financing investment and productive capacity that generates tomorrow's exports, the equation is defensible.

If it is principally financing consumption, Sri Lanka may once again be increasing its demand for dollars faster than its ability to earn them.

That distinction matters enormously under the IMF programme and after sovereign default. Sri Lanka no longer has the luxury of discovering an external imbalance only after reserves have disappeared.

The Government therefore needs to explain what lies behind four consecutive months of current-account deficits, whether it regards the widening trade gap as temporary and what its projections show for the remainder of 2026.

The question is not whether Sri Lanka should close the economy again. It should not. Nor is the answer another arbitrary import ban whenever the numbers become uncomfortable.

The challenge is considerably harder: build an economy capable of paying for what it imports.

Sri Lanka survived one foreign-exchange catastrophe at enormous social cost.

Be that as it may, survival is not the same thing as reform. If the country is once again beginning to spend foreign exchange faster than it earns it, the time to ask why is now not when the dollars begin running out.

THE SHIPS ARE COMING. CAN COLOMBO HANDLE THEM?

Colombo has broken into the world's top 20 container ports and volumes are surging. But ships are being delayed, tens of thousands of containers are caught in an inter-terminal backlog and pressure is exposing weaknesses at precisely the moment Sri Lanka has an opportunity to capture more regional business.

NEWSLINE

There is a delicious irony developing at the Port of Colombo. Sri Lanka has spent years wanting more ships, more containers and more transshipment business. Now some of that business has arrived and parts of the port are struggling to digest it.

Container throughput reached **774,513 TEUs in July, up 7.3 per cent year-on-year**, while total throughput during the first seven months climbed 11.2 per cent to more than 5.2 million TEUs. Transshipment traffic alone exceeded 4.18 million TEUs during that period.

Colombo has consequently moved from 26th to **20th in Alphaliner's global container-port rankings**, entering the world's top 20 for the first time.

That should be very good news.

But Hapag-Lloyd's latest operational assessment presents the other side of the story. The shipping giant says vessels with berthing windows at Colombo can now expect delays of **48 to 72 hours**, with inter-terminal transfer ITT pendency reaching **53,000 TEUs**, up from the 35,000 TEUs reported only weeks earlier. Yard density and bad weather are adding to the difficulty.

Industry sources have reported vessel turnaround at Colombo's deep-draft terminals stretching to as much as **six days** in some cases.

The pressure is concentrated particularly at Colombo International Container Terminal and, to a lesser extent, Colombo West International Terminal, because these facilities can accommodate the largest vessels.

Part of the problem is actually an opportunity created elsewhere. Disruption in the Gulf has diverted cargo towards South Asian ports, and Colombo's geography and deep-water capability make it an obvious alternative. But an opportunity is only valuable if Sri Lanka can handle it.

There are other warning signs. The East Container Terminal has reportedly absorbed relatively little of the overflow, with industry sources pointing to efficiency concerns. An insufficient tug fleet is also said to be slowing vessel movements within the harbour.

Two additional tugboats have been approved for hire at a reported cost of **US$17.16 million over five years**, excluding taxes but they are not expected to enter service until next year.

Meanwhile, Colombo West International Terminal's second phase is expected to be completed by December, taking its annual capacity towards 3.2 million TEUs. That additional capacity cannot come soon enough.

Sri Lanka therefore has an unusual problem: **success is testing the infrastructure required to sustain that success.**

Shipping lines are not sentimental. Colombo's position on the map is permanent; their decision to use Colombo is not. A container that can be transshipped faster and more reliably through another regional hub represents business that can disappear almost as quickly as it arrived.

Be that as it may, the congestion should not obscure the larger achievement. Colombo entering the global top 20 is significant. The question for the Ports Authority and Government is whether Sri Lanka can convert an extraordinary moment of regional disruption into permanent market share.

The ships are coming. The real test is whether Colombo can persuade them to keep coming.

A LOGISTICS HUB IS COMING. WHO GETS WHAT?

The Ports Authority says a long-awaited logistics hub with free-zone and bonded warehousing facilities could be operating within months. It could transform Colombo from a place where containers merely change ships into somewhere goods are stored, processed and redistributed. But this is not simply another new project there is already a substantial investment structure behind the logistics-hub story.

NEWSLINE

Sri Lanka has spent decades boasting about its position in the middle of the Indian Ocean. The boast is justified. The more awkward question is why the country has done comparatively little to monetise that position beyond allowing millions of containers to pass through Colombo on their way somewhere else.

Sri Lanka Ports Authority Chairman Dr Parakrama Dissanayake now says a long-awaited logistics hub incorporating free-zone and bonded warehousing facilities is expected to be launched within the next **two to three months**. He believes it could allow Colombo to graduate from its four-decade role principally as a transshipment port into a much broader logistics centre capable of attracting foreign investment in warehousing and related activities.

The timing is interesting. Container volumes increased by about **12 per cent during the first half of 2026**, according to the SLPA Chairman, putting Colombo on course to handle close to nine million TEUs this year.

The Ports Authority is targeting another **1.5 million TEUs of capacity by the end of 2027** as existing infrastructure comes under increasing pressure.

There is another potentially important development. The port-to-airport expressway connection is expected to open around October and could reduce the journey between the two to approximately **25 minutes**. That creates the possibility of genuine sea-air logistics cargo arriving by ship, being processed in Colombo and moving rapidly to the airport for onward transportation.

But NEWSLINE believes the announcement deserves closer examination because Colombo's logistics ambitions did not begin last week.

An official 2023 Gazette sets out the structure of the **South Asia Commercial and Logistics Hub**, a 50-year project involving China Merchants Port Holdings, the Sri Lanka Ports Authority and Access Engineering. Under that structure, China Merchants holds **70 per cent**, while SLPA and Access Engineering each hold **15 per cent**.

Phase One was envisaged as a **US$280 million investment**, financed on a 70:30 debt-to-equity basis. The same Gazette provided a **15-year corporate income-tax exemption**, commencing from the first profitable year or two years after commercial operations begin, whichever comes first.

Cabinet records show the project emerged from an earlier proposal connected to Colombo International Container Terminal and was approved as a public-private partnership after evaluation by a Cabinet-appointed negotiating committee.

That does not make the project objectionable. Quite the contrary: a serious logistics hub could be exactly the sort of infrastructure Sri Lanka needs.

A container passing through Colombo earns one kind of revenue. A container whose contents are warehoused, consolidated, repackaged, labelled,

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A LOGISTICS HUB...

processed and redistributed from Colombo creates an entirely different economic ecosystem warehouses, transport, finance, insurance, employment and foreign-exchange earnings.

Sri Lanka Customs already permits entrepôt operations, including bonded warehousing and limited activities such as repacking and relabelling. The missing ingredient has been doing it at sufficient scale and efficiency to make Colombo genuinely competitive with established regional logistics centres.

The Government should therefore be ambitious. But ambition and transparency are not enemies.

If major State assets, tax concessions and exceptionally long commercial rights are being used to turn Colombo into a logistics hub, the public should be able to see precisely what Sri Lanka contributes, what the investors contribute, what revenue the State receives and what performance obligations accompany those concessions.

Be that as it may, the fundamental idea is difficult to quarrel with. Sri Lanka sits beside one of the world's great shipping highways. For far too long we have been satisfied watching the traffic go past. The opportunity now is not merely to unload the ships it is to build an economy around them.

THE TAXMAN GAVE BACK RS 82 BILLION. IS SOMETHING ACTUALLY WORKING?

Sri Lanka's Inland Revenue Department says it has refunded more than Rs 82 billion in VAT, with virtually all eligible refunds processed in an average of 29 days. After years in which businesses complained that money owed by the State could disappear into bureaucratic limbo, this may be one Government reform deserving something increasingly unusual credit.

NEWSLINE

Governments are very good at announcing how much tax they have collected.

They are considerably less enthusiastic about discussing how quickly they return money that was never theirs to keep.

That is why the latest figures on Sri Lanka's VAT refund system deserve attention.

The Inland Revenue Department has reportedly processed approximately **Rs 82.4 billion in VAT refunds**, with **99.98 per cent of eligible refunds processed within an average of 29 days**, following the introduction of a risk-based refund mechanism. The Treasury says the change has substantially accelerated a process that historically frustrated businesses, particularly exporters.

VAT refunds are not a favour from the Government. When an exporter or other eligible business pays VAT on inputs but is entitled to recover that tax, delays effectively turn the private sector into an involuntary lender to the State.

For a large company that can be inconvenient. For a smaller exporter operating on tight margins and borrowed working capital, it can be crippling.

A refund sitting for months in a Government department is money that cannot pay salaries, purchase raw materials, service bank facilities or finance the next export order. Worse, the company may itself be paying interest to a bank while waiting for the Government to return its money.

That makes the reported **29-day average** important.

The new mechanism reportedly uses risk assessment to distinguish claims requiring closer examination from those that can be processed more quickly. That is considerably more sensible than treating every taxpayer as a potential criminal and every refund application as an invitation to begin an archaeological excavation.

But the numbers deserve independent scrutiny too.

An average can conceal outliers. NEWSLINE would like to know how many claims remain outstanding beyond 30, 60 and 90 days; the value of those claims; whether the 99.98 per cent figure refers to applications, value or claims already deemed eligible; and whether exporters themselves recognise the improvement described by the Treasury.

There is also a larger economic point.

Sri Lanka regularly talks about becoming an export-led economy. Yet exporters do not operate on speeches. They operate on cash flow, predictable rules, competitive financing and a Government administration that does not unnecessarily trap their working capital.

If the new VAT system is genuinely returning legitimate refunds in approximately a month, it is exactly the sort of unglamorous administrative reform that can improve the country's investment environment far more effectively than another conference announcing that Sri Lanka is open for business.

Government should therefore publish the performance data regularly. Let taxpayers see the number and value of claims received, approved, rejected and outstanding, together with average processing times.

And if those figures confirm what is now being claimed, give the Inland Revenue Department its due.

Be that as it may, taxpayers have spent years being told to pay the State promptly. It is only reasonable that when the State owes taxpayers money, the same rule should apply.

EL NIÑO MAY BE COMING. WILL THE LIGHTS STAY ON?

The Government says Sri Lanka has enough water and generating capacity to avoid power cuts in the months ahead, even if El Niño brings drier conditions. This time there is another piece in the energy puzzle: large-scale battery storage. The question is whether Sri Lanka is finally building a power system capable of storing the sunshine it has in abundance.

NEWSLINE

Sri Lankans have heard assurances about uninterrupted electricity before, which is why the latest one deserves both attention and a little scrutiny.

Energy Minister Kumara Jayakody has told Parliament that the Government does not expect electricity shortages in the coming months despite concerns over possible El Niño conditions and their impact on rainfall and hydroelectric generation.

As at September 10, reservoirs reportedly contained water capable of producing approximately **750 GWh of electricity**, representing about **58.7 per cent of available hydro storage capacity**. The Government expects rainfall during the coming weeks to strengthen that position further.

That is reassuring, but hydroelectricity has always contained an obvious weakness: Sri Lanka cannot order rain.

A prolonged dry period can rapidly transform comfortable reservoir levels into an energy problem. When hydro generation falls, the country becomes more dependent on thermal generation and consequently imported fuel, precisely when Sri Lanka's fuel import bill is already putting pressure on the external account.

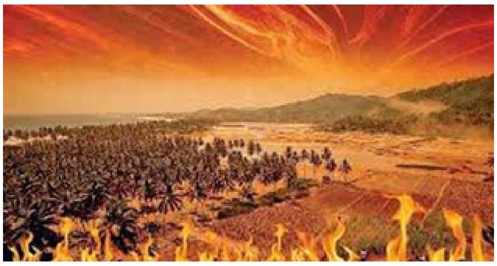
The more interesting part of the Minister's statement therefore concerns batteries.

"Questioning The Answers"

The Government says it is moving ahead with **Battery Energy Storage Systems BESS** and preparing concessions for battery installations exceeding 100 kW when used to store renewable electricity.

That sounds technical. Economically, it could be transformative.

Sri Lanka increasingly produces solar electricity during daylight hours, including thousands of rooftop systems. But electricity must be available when people actually need it. Solar generation peaks during the day while household demand rises sharply in the evening.



Without storage, excess renewable electricity generated at one time cannot simply be put on a shelf and used later.

A battery can.

Large-scale storage allows electricity generated by solar and wind to be retained and released when demand rises, reducing the need to start expensive thermal plants merely because the sun has gone down.

It can also help stabilise the grid as Sri Lanka adds more intermittent renewable generation.

The policy direction therefore makes sense. What matters now is execution.

NEWSLINE would like to know how much battery capacity the Government intends to install, who will own it, how projects will be tendered, what tariff or capacity-payment arrangements will apply and critically who ultimately carries the financial risk.

Sri Lanka's history is littered with perfectly sensible energy ideas subsequently damaged by opaque procurement, questionable pricing or contracts whose real costs became apparent only after they had been signed.

Battery storage must not become another such story.

There is also a wider opportunity. If storage, rooftop solar, utility-scale renewables and a modernised transmission network are developed together, Sri Lanka can reduce exposure to imported fossil fuels while improving energy security.

That would benefit not merely the electricity sector but the balance of payments.

Every additional unit of economically generated domestic renewable electricity potentially represents fuel that does not have to be purchased with scarce foreign exchange.

Be that as it may, El Niño provides a useful reminder. Sri Lanka cannot control whether it rains. It can control whether the country's electricity system remains dependent upon it.

YOUR SIM CARD IS ABOUT TO GET A FACE

Sri Lanka is tightening mobile-phone registration. New SIM buyers are expected to provide a live photograph, while the regulator wants every mobile user fully identified by 2027. Fighting anonymous criminal communications is a legitimate objective. But with nearly 30 million active SIMs, NEWSLINE asks what information will be collected, who can see it and how it will be protected.

NEWSLINE

Buying a SIM card in Sri Lanka is about to become rather more personal.

The Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka says new subscribers are expected to be required to provide a **live photograph at the point of registration**, probably from the end of this year. The regulator then intends to move towards **100 per cent identification of existing SIM and mobile-phone users during 2027**.

There is a perfectly serious reason behind it. TRCSL Director General Air Vice Marshal (Retd.) Bandula Herath says Police and other law-enforcement authorities have raised concerns about an increase in criminal activity involving SIM cards obtained through irregular channels and connections whose actual users cannot readily be traced.

The scale is substantial. Sri Lanka has **nearly 30 million active SIM connections**. Under the present arrangements, one person can reportedly obtain as many as five SIMs from each mobile operator using the same National Identity Card potentially 15 connections across three operators.

The Government had already decided in February to overhaul the regulatory framework. Cabinet approved amendments covering, among other things, the **re-registration of subscriber information for SIM cards obtained before August 2, 2019**, where operators may not possess adequate subscriber information.

The changes are also intended to address SIMs for 16- and 17-year-olds and foreign visitors.

There is little argument with the basic proposition that a mobile connection should be traceable to the person actually using it. Fraudsters, organised criminals and others should not be able to exploit weaknesses in registration procedures to disappear behind somebody else's identity.

But identification and privacy are not mutually exclusive. A live photograph is personal data. Add it to a National Identity Card number, address, telephone number and the other subscriber information already collected by operators and the result becomes a valuable identity record.

The question therefore cannot end with whether the State has a good reason to collect it.

NEWSLINE wants to know **how long the photographs will be retained, whether they will be held by the mobile operators or in a central system, who will have access to them, under what legal authority they may be disclosed and what happens if that database is compromised.**

There is another interesting admission from the regulator.

Herath says TRCSL currently depends largely upon information supplied by the telecom operators themselves when assessing network quality and does not yet possess an independent system capable of comprehensively verifying that information.

That deserves attention too.

If Sri Lanka is going to demand better identification of every person using its mobile networks, consumers are entitled to demand better accountability from the companies providing those networks and from the regulator supervising them.

There is some good news buried in the announcement. Work is continuing on **mobile number portability**, which would eventually allow customers to change operator without surrendering the telephone number around which much of their digital lives may have been built.

Security matters. So does privacy. And so does the quality of the service for which almost 30 million connections are paying.

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YOU CAN CHANGE THE TAX. YOU CAN'T KEEP CHANGING THE RULES.

Sri Lanka reopened vehicle imports after a five-year restriction and collected billions in badly needed revenue. But the country's automotive industry is warning that repeated policy changes, taxes and regulatory uncertainty are making international manufacturers think twice. The issue is no longer simply what a car costs it is whether investors can predict what Sri Lanka will do next.

NEWSLINE

Sri Lanka's motor industry has become an extraordinarily useful cash machine for the Treasury.

Vehicle imports resumed in 2025 after almost five years of restrictions, unleashing pent-up demand and producing a substantial increase in customs revenue. During the first seven months of this year alone, vehicle imports reportedly cost approximately **US$1.5 billion** one reason Sri Lanka's overall import bill has risen so sharply. But there is another side to the reopening.

Associated Motorways has warned that what it describes as policy-driven distortions in the market are damaging Sri Lanka's attractiveness to international automotive manufacturers and investors.

That deserves attention because the argument is considerably bigger than whether a Toyota, Nissan, Suzuki or any other vehicle costs too much.

A manufacturer or international distributor deciding whether to commit capital to Sri Lanka has to make decisions months sometimes years ahead. Vehicles must be ordered, production slots reserved, specifications agreed, financing arranged, dealerships developed, spare parts stocked and employees trained.

All of that assumes one rather basic thing: **the rules under which the investment was made will remain reasonably predictable.**

Sri Lanka has struggled with that concept.

Taxes can change. Import restrictions can appear. Valuation methodologies can be altered. Regulations can be introduced or interpreted differently, sometimes with little notice. A business that made a perfectly rational commercial decision under one policy environment can consequently discover that the economics have changed before its shipment even reaches Colombo.

Government has every right to tax vehicles. Indeed, after Sri Lanka's fiscal collapse, vehicle taxation represents an important source of revenue and the State must also consider the foreign-exchange consequences of unrestricted imports.

But taxation and unpredictability are two different things. A company can price a high tax into an investment decision. What it cannot easily price is uncertainty over what the tax, regulation or import condition will be when the product actually arrives.

That is why policy stability matters.

The same principle extends far beyond motor vehicles. A renewable-energy investor considering a twenty-year project, a manufacturer contemplating a factory or an international company deciding whether to establish its regional operation in Colombo all ask essentially the same question.

Can we trust the rules?

Sri Lanka competes for investment against countries capable of offering larger markets, cheaper energy, bigger labour forces and, in some cases, considerably more generous incentives. One advantage the country can provide almost free of charge is predictable government.

That does not mean freezing policy forever. Governments must respond to economic circumstances, close loopholes and change taxes when necessary. But major changes should be transparent, properly consulted upon and introduced with sufficient notice for legitimate businesses to adjust.

There is another reason this matters now. Sri Lanka is attempting to convince the world that the economic behaviour which preceded the sovereign default has changed. Investors will judge that claim not from investment conferences or glossy presentations but from what happens after they actually put money into the country.

If rules repeatedly change after commercial commitments have been made, the message travels remarkably quickly.

Be that as it may, Sri Lanka spent years asking international companies to come back. Now that they are looking again, the country should remember something rather elementary: investors can tolerate expensive rules. What they cannot tolerate indefinitely are rules they cannot predict.

YOU CAN CHANGE THE TAX. YOU CAN'T KEEP CHANGING THE RULES.

The queues have gone. The rupee is steadier. Reserves have recovered and the economy is growing again. That is precisely when Sri Lanka should become more vigilant not less. The numbers emerging from the external account are an early warning that some very old habits may be returning.

NEWSLINE EDITORIAL

There is something wonderfully seductive about normality.

Petrol is available. Electricity works. Supermarket shelves are full. Cars are arriving at the port again.

Tourists are coming. Businesses are investing. We should at least have the decency to learn from it.

And Sri Lankans no longer begin each morning wondering whether the country possesses enough dollars to pay for tomorrow's fuel shipment.

After 2022, that is no small achievement.

But economic crises rarely announce their return with a brass band. They begin quietly, in numbers that appear manageable individually until somebody eventually puts them together.

Sri Lanka's current account has reportedly been in deficit for four consecutive months. The merchandise trade deficit for the first seven months has widened to around **US$6.5 billion**. Fuel imports have cost approximately **US$3.62 billion**, while vehicle imports have absorbed another **US$1.5 billion**.

None of those numbers by itself constitutes a crisis. Together, however, they deserve attention.

Sri Lanka's economic catastrophe was not caused by one Government, one bond issue, one tax cut or one Governor of the Central Bank. Those things mattered enormously, but beneath them sat a structural problem that successive Governments found politically convenient to avoid.

We consumed more than we produced, imported more than we exported and borrowed to make up the difference.

For years it worked.
Until it didn't.

The danger now is not that Sri Lanka will suddenly wake up tomorrow morning in April 2022. The country has rebuilt reserves, completed a debt restructuring, subjected itself to an IMF programme and imposed extraordinarily painful adjustments on its people.

The danger is complacency.

When a country emerges from intensive care, the absence of immediate pain does not mean the underlying disease has disappeared.

There is nothing inherently wrong with importing vehicles. There is nothing wrong with importing machinery, consumer goods or fuel. A modern economy cannot prosper behind barricades, and returning to arbitrary import bans every time foreign-exchange numbers become uncomfortable would merely repeat another failed Sri Lankan experiment.

The question is what those imports produce.

If Sri Lanka spends a billion dollars importing machinery that generates two billion dollars of exports, that is investment.

If it spends a billion dollars principally increasing consumption without generating the foreign exchange required to sustain it, that is a very different proposition.

That is why the widening trade deficit deserves more than a shrug.

The Government's economic task is no longer merely stabilisation.

"Questioning The Answers"

It must now demonstrate that the structure of the economy is changing.

Where are the new exports? Where is the foreign direct investment? Where are the industries capable of earning the dollars required to finance the living standards Sri Lankans understandably want?

Tourism and workers' remittances are enormously valuable. But a country of 22 million people cannot indefinitely build its economic strategy around sending its citizens abroad to earn money while inviting foreigners here to spend theirs.

Sri Lanka must make things, sell things, develop intellectual property, provide internationally competitive services and use its extraordinary geographical position to generate value rather than merely admiring it on a map.

There are encouraging signs.

Colombo Port has entered the world's top 20 container ports. A major logistics hub is being developed. Renewable energy and battery storage offer an opportunity to reduce dependence on imported fuel. Improvements in VAT refunds suggest that even the machinery of Government can occasionally be made to work better.

These are precisely the reforms that matter.
But they must happen faster than our appetite for imports returns.

And Government must resist another particularly Sri Lankan temptation: believing that because the immediate emergency has passed, politics can once again consume all the oxygen.

Accountability matters. Corruption must be prosecuted. Those who stole public money should answer for it. The law must apply equally whether the accused once occupied Temple Trees or lives down the road.

But governing a country cannot become an endless exercise in prosecuting yesterday while neglecting tomorrow.

People ultimately judge Governments by whether their children can find worthwhile employment, whether their businesses can prosper, whether their income buys more rather than less and whether the country offers enough hope that leaving it no longer appears the most rational career decision.

Sri Lanka paid an appalling price for its last economic lesson.

Millions became poorer. Businesses disappeared. Savings were eroded. Taxes rose. Electricity prices exploded. Families reduced meals. Professionals emigrated. And an entire population discovered what sovereign bankruptcy actually feels like.

Be that as it may, the most dangerous moment after surviving a crisis is the moment you begin believing you cannot have another one.

Sri Lanka has earned the right to feel relieved.

It has not yet earned the right to feel comfortable.