Military Combatting an Invisible Enemy: Securitizing the COVID-19 Threat in Sri Lanka

T Bandara

Faculty of Graduate Studies, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University

2020-mphilvi-022@kdu.ac.lk

The COVID-19 global pandemic has presented numerous non-traditional security threats to many countries in the world. In the face of the deteriorating health crisis, several countries including Sri Lanka have conceded to increase their military engagements remarkably in health-related undertakings despite growing criticism from various parties. However, the reasons for such extreme employments remain virtually unexplored. Thus, this article aims to analyse Covid-19 from the perspective of security studies and to identify reasons and typologies of associations between military role and the national response mechanisms during the COVID-19 in Sri Lanka (March 2020 to June 2021). In this qualitative research, the author uses primary data such as interviews/discussions with subject matter experts from military and civilian sectors, and secondary data such as newspaper articles, reputed web articles, and journal articles. The content analysis is used for systematically evaluating the symbolic contents of every form of recorded communications. The author identified eight distinct descriptive categories of reasons for the employment of the military in COVID-19 response measures extending across five analytical themes. Most noticeable themes included how armed forces lead the national COVID-19 response mechanism, together with context-specific military-political legacies, military repatriation and evacuation, and sustenance of varied public systems. The author claims that the COVID-19 enabled state actors to securitize the threat, sanctioning substantial military engagements that generated several positive and negative outcomes. The study highlights that deployment of the military was largely in the interest of political and armed forces hierarchy, which also facilitated the military to expand their operational readiness, remain relevant, increase their social standing, and support societies with their expertise.

Keywords: *securitization, security, non-traditional, COVID-19*