

Sri Lanka Customs (SLC)

28 April 2020

SLC has implemented interim mechanism to ensure uninterrupted operations during the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic

1. Measures aiming to Facilitate the Cross-border Movement of Relief and Essential Supplies

- 1.1. Routine cargo selectivity criteria were tailored, especially to release medium and low risk cargo, thus focusing only on the high-risk cargo. As a result, around 70% of the essential items were released under Green Channel.
- 1.2. With the concurrence of other government agencies, a procedure was introduced to receive and coordinate regulatory approvals such as standards and permits via electronic means to ensure expedited clearance and release.
- 1.3. Provisional online procedures were introduced to verify certificates of origin and grant preferential tariff treatments for transactions under Preferential Free Trade Agreements (PTA) under South Asian Association Regional Corporation (SAARC). For consistent implementation of the same a special webinar was also organized by the SAARC Secretariat with the participation of members; Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
- 1.4. Provisional goods clearance procedure was extended, with priority, for consignments of relief goods and consignments needing expedited clearance.
- 1.5. Existing 24x7 services were limited to approximately 8 hours per day in view of the low volume of exports as most of the factories were closed for operations due to government policy on minimizing human gathering. However, facilities were made available on call as required during Customs non-operating hours.
- 1.6. In addition to the regular Customs Enquiry Point, a special 24x7 help desk is in operation to attend public and stakeholder inquiries.
- 1.7. COVID-19 Contingency Plans detailing working hours and arrangements and emergency official contact numbers were published and regularly updated on the Sri Lanka Customs website <http://www.customs.gov.lk>

2. Measures aiming at Supporting the Economy and Sustaining Supply Chain Continuity

Sri Lanka Customs, as the Frontline Border Agency, provided active contribution to the Presidential Task Force that was established to monitor and prevent spreading COVID-19, as well as to provide essential services to sustain overall community life in the country.

Following policy decisions were put into action in respect of Customs accordingly.

- 2.1. Hold meetings on a regular basis with key governmental agencies that are engaged in the essential services thus carrying forward real political will.
- 2.2. Take immediate steps to maintain the social distancing and to minimize human Gathering in Customs operational work areas.
- 2.3. Implement concessionary tariff rates introduced to ensure constant supply of essential medicines and medical devices.
- 2.4. Relax regulatory requirements such as standards approvals and licenses subject to post clearance checks.
- 2.5. Introduce a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for processing of applications for Inward Processing and attending incidental operational requests and inquiries over electronic mail with templates ensuring uninterrupted execution of industry and related import and export activities during difficult periods such as epidemics and terrorism.
- 2.6. Facilitate Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) to evacuate the spaces near the cargo unloading bays in order to maintain the continuity of unloading goods from the vessels keeping supply chain uninterrupted, by providing clearance for even nonessential goods from time to time.

3. Measures aiming at Protecting Customs administrations' Staff

Following Steps were taken to maintain social distancing of the staff while minimizing intervention of Customs staff.

- 3.1. Number of staff deployed was kept to a minimum on a roster divided into several groups where one such group consists around 20% of the normal number of staff.
- 3.2. The staff continued their duties by connecting virtually from their homes.
- 3.3. Sanitizing facilities and protective gears were provided to the staff where required.
- 3.4. An approved disinfecting chamber was established at the entrance to the Customs premises.
- 3.5. An interim paperless procedure was introduced for electronic submission and processing of CusDecs (Goods declarations) taking advantage of existing e-payment platform for implementing social distancing requirements introduced by the government for countering contagion.

4. Measures aiming at Protecting Society

- 4.1. Expedited Customs clearance processes were provided for the clearance of inward and outward passengers in terms of the prompt measures taken by the government (given below) to prevent COVID 19.
 - Facilitated processing of departing foreign nationals, mostly tourists, on special flights that were arranged.
 - Facilitated processing of Sri Lankan nationals who were brought down by special flights arranged by the government.
 - Steps were taken to refer the passengers arrived from abroad directly to the specially established quarantine centres managed by the government.

- Actions were taken to temporarily shut-down the unaccompanied passenger baggage clearance depots until the situation stabilizes in view of the fact that the majority of these passengers are from every corner of the island.

4.2. As the frontline border Agency in Sri Lanka, active contribution was provided to the Presidential Task Force that was established to monitor and prevent spreading COVID-19, as well as to provide essential services to sustain overall community life in the country.

5. Other Measures.

- 5.1.** Continuous dialog was established with related other governmental agencies and private sector for co-ordination and to address concerns. Meetings with other governmental agencies and private sector were held continuously maintaining social distancing standards.
- 5.2.** Necessary arrangements were made with Sri Lanka Police to coordinate and facilitate travel of Customs staff, transporters, and Customs House Agents who are engaged in clearance of goods.
- 5.3.** Request to waive demurrage charges were efficiently coordinated with Sri Lanka
- 5.4.** Ports Authority, two private terminal handlers and Air Cargo Authorities by the traders on port demurrage charges, as and when required.
- 5.5.** Fullest cooperation was established with Private stakeholders of Inland Clearance Depots (cargo examination points) in order to facilitate the clearance while adhering government policies to protect staff and the Customs House Agents.
- 5.6.** Prompt actions were taken to facilitate requests send by foreign missions, especially to expedite some essential exports.