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## BUSINESS

# 'Need urgent to vaccinate SL's apparel sector workers'

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A. Sukumaran



Malith Jayasinghe



Madhavie Gunawardena



'The apparel sector represents 47 per cent of Sri Lanka's total exports. It is imperative to vaccinate the 350,000 export sector workers to be able to meet customer requirements. There is a global demand for apparel but Sri Lanka is falling short in meeting deadlines and important clients are moving towards competitors who are supplying without any delays,' chairperson, Joint Apparel Association Forum Sri Lanka A. Sukumaran said.



Sukumaran was speaking at a virtual panel discussion hosted by the Institute of Policy (IPS) on February 2 titled, 'Recovery of Sri Lanka's Apparel Sector from the Covid-19

An IPS press release said –

The Institute of Policy of Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS) hosted a virtual panel discussion 'Recovery of Sri Lanka's Apparel Sector from the COVID-19 Crisis' on February 2. The panel was held in partnership with Southern Voice and the Centre for Policy Dialogue, Bangladesh. It is part of IPS' research examining the impacts of the ongoing pandemic on the apparel

The panel featured Joint Apparel Association Forum Sri Lanka (JAAFSL) chairperson Sukumaran; Department of Labour Commissioner Madhavie Gunawardena; and Leso Holdings Ltd. Director Malith Jayasinghe. IPS Research Economist Kithmina Hewage moderated the discussion.

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a heavy toll on the Sri Lankan economy. The apparel sector, which accounts for a large fraction of our export market was hard hit by the pandemic particularly during the second wave.

"If workers are not vaccinated before May this year, there will be serious repercussions on the entire sector and the country's economy. Sri Lanka has a reputation as a reliable supplier of apparel that is now under threat," Sukumaran said. He added that the apparel sector was reacting to the cost for the vaccinations and requested the government to help them source the necessary vaccinations.

"Building a fabric park in the Eastern province as proposed in the 2021 budget will help the apparel industry grow tremendously as we will not bear the brunt of depending on China for raw materials and key players like the USA are looking to shift from China for raw materials. The fabric park will be a key player in the long-term growth, Sukumaran said.

"Apparel SMEs were severely affected due to COVID-19 and the major issues faced by the sector were: cash shortages, worker absenteeism, mobility issues, scarcity of raw materials, increased cost of production, and loss in demand. The second wave worsened an already difficult situation, Malith Jayasinghe said.

"The pandemic was a unique external challenge, thus the Health Ministry had to come into play. Most of the laws and health guidelines are issued under the quarantine law; thus the Health Ministry and the DG – Health Services is the respective authority for that.

though we say that it is the labour laws that prevail in the factories, for pandemic-rel issues, it is the health guidelines we have to obey. The Department of Labour cannot when quarantine laws are violated,” Madhavia Gunawardena said.

She explained however that the Labour Department has been working actively to add complaints made, and encouraged workers to contact the department if they face any difficulties.

The webinar can be viewed on IPS' YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJfF5FejOVA&t=1501s>

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