

A unique show of solidarity in Sri Lanka



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ALL high-rise buildings dot the sea front of Galle Face. Most are international hotel chains, and one is a swanky upmarket shopping mall—a nod to the fast-paced construction and development work that Galle Sea Face has witnessed in recent years.

The resentment against the Sri Lankan government's mishandling of the economy had been growing in the country since last year. Sri Lanka's two million farmers have been protesting for months against the government's decision to go "organic" and the subsequent order banning import of chemical fertilisers in April 2021.

All this coalesced into a massive street protest of a million people calling for the president and his government to resign. A curfew was clamped in the western province, social media was blocked for almost 13 hours, and then a general public emergency was declared on April 1 this year.

protest has turned into an all-night vigil near the Presidential Secretariat. Protesters have braved heavy rain and thunderstorm to stay there. Temporary tents have been set up at the protest site that is now being called "Gota-ga-Gama" (Gama is Sinhala for village). Crowds typically swell during the day and on holidays. Many come to the site



after finishing work. Others bring their children to witness and be part of the movement. The aged and the infirm sit in wheelchairs holding placards. Protesters flank the road near the secretariat waving the Sri Lankan national flag, shouting slogans and holding placards that say "Gota Go Home," "Pissa (lunatic) go home," "Bring our money back," "Leave my future alone," "You have messed with the wrong generation."

The protest site itself is a study in civic awareness. There is no littering. Empty plastic water bottles have been strung together to read "Go Home Gota" and hung on the fence bordering the promenade. The rest have been corralled into nets to be recycled later.

People shout slogans against Sri Lanka's President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and demand that the Rajapaksa family politicians step down, during a protest amid the country's economic crisis, at Independence Square in Colombo, Sri Lanka on April 4, 2022.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

through spontaneous and voluntary individual contributions. People from all walks of life, from all faiths and beliefs and from across the island, including the indigenous Vedda community, find representation here. Muslims break their Ramadan fast here with food and prayers. Buddhists and Christians have held vigils, and the

was always dependent on imports to sustain its economy. But indiscriminate borrowings for big infrastructure projects, which typically have low yields and long turnaround time, have tilted the already fragile foreign exchange reserves against it.

A series of missteps by the incumbent government aggravated an already precarious situation. In its desire to become the first nation in the world to go completely "organic," the government in April 2021 banned the import of all chemical fertilisers.

Sri Lanka forex reserves fell to USD 1.93 billion at the end of March this year; foreign debt repayment of USD 4 billion is due this year. The Sri Lankan government has been forced to default on all its foreign debt repayments to preserve its forex reserves for essential imports.

The resolve of the Sri Lankan people at the protest site is almost palpable. They have rebuffed calls from the prime minister for talks and find it difficult to believe when the president says that the current situation was not his making.

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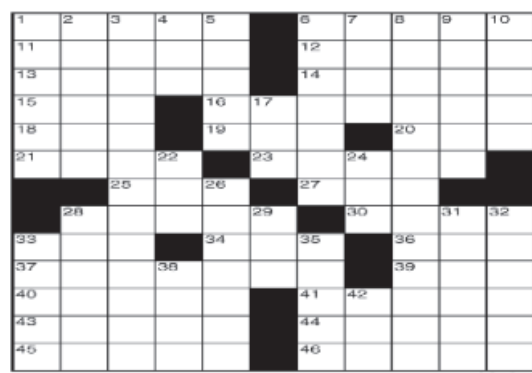
People from various parts of the country will soon set out for their home from their places of work to celebrate Eid-ul-Fitr with their families. Like every year, this will put extra pressure on public transport.

skilled drivers. Since a lot of people will take the river routes, the authorities must ensure that the launches and ferries are safe for them.

Md Rasel Sheikh
Akiy Foundation School & College, Uttara

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30 Closes
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36 Workout unit
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44 Had a go at
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2 Wise goddess
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4 "Dig in!"
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6 Montana
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9 Close, as a freezer bag
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22 Due follower
24 Brewpub order
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42 Bauxite, for one



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