Report from a Sri Lankan fishing village—Part Two

A big issue is clean drinking water

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Following the death of a Tamil fisherman in a collision with a naval vessel on January 24, World Socialist Web Site reporters went to the fisherman's village of Udappuva and spoke to villagers about the circumstances of the incident, the living conditions they face and the history of repression in the area by the police and military. Part two of the report describes the conditions facing the fishermen and their families.

The road to Udappuva is a gravel track across a barren piece of land a hundred kilometers from the Colombo-Putlam bus route. Putlam is itself a remote town in the Northwestern Province. The strip of land—a peninsula—is named Udappuva and is surrounded by the sea on three sides. There are three villages in this greater Udappuva—named Udappuva, Andimuni and Selvapuram. More than 4,000 fishing families seek to make a living here.

The eye-catching scenery in the area is in sharp contrast to the harsh struggle that the villagers face each day for their means of survival. Their equipment has not changed since the old feudal days—spread nets and old kinds of boats. A few have small fiberglass boats fitted with engines.

Except for a few, most “houses” in Udappuva are actually huts made with coconut leaf thatching which provides inadequate shelter against either the sun or the rain. Usually during the rainy season the area is flooded. About 75 percent of the houses lack any toilet facilities.

A big issue in the village is clean drinking water. Most housewives have to walk miles in search of water as the whole village has only two wells. One is inside the hospital premises and the other is within the police compound.

As villagers explained: “In 1984 an Israeli firm drew up a 4.3 million rupee scheme to ‘solve the drinking water problem'. But it was abandoned. In 1993 there was big talk about the fisheries ministry launching a 9.3 million-rupee water scheme. But that too was abandoned. Although the present Peoples Alliance government has started a pipe-borne water supply scheme, they are attempting to hoodwink people. The water is not suitable for drinking. That is how our water problem has been solved by governments.”

Villagers are still walking miles for drinking water and the selling of water has become a small business. A trader who brings water in bowsers sells it at two rupees a pot (a pitcher), which for villagers is a significant expense. Finding water for bathing is another difficult question. Rainwater collected in pits and holes is used for bathing until it dries up. But this is very unsanitary, leading to the danger of epidemics such as cholera.

Most of the adult population cannot read or write. Most people are too poor to send their children to school and even when they could afford the cost there are no proper schools. During the 1960s, two schools were built, one at Andimuni and the other at Udappuva. The villagers said they had collected a large portion of money needed to build the schools.

But as the Andimuni school principal explained: “Today these two schools are at the verge of collapse. They have not been provided with adequate staff. There are no laboratories, not enough desks and chairs and no sports equipment at all. Around 4,200 students attend these two schools. Half of the staff are voluntary teachers. For these teachers a sum of 1,200 rupees (US$17) a month is paid out of the contributions from the students. The government does not pay for these teachers. Under these conditions there is no chance whatever of obtaining a higher education.”

After studying up to seventh or eighth grade, amidst

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immeasurable hardships, students are forced to leave the school and join the difficult battle against the sea. The young boys have to work with their fathers or neighbours in wadis—stalls erected on the beach to choose and sell different varieties of fish.

A small hospital with one ward and a maternity clinic is situated at Andimuni to cover the entire area. The government has provided only one doctor and two attendants to help him in other work. “I have been working here for 12 years,” the doctor said. “Then, there was only one building here. After writing lot of appeals we got another building, an official quarters and an ambulance. There are only two attendants. The government does not provide nurses for this kind of rural hospitals.”

About 40 patients a day normally come to the hospital. Epidemics are common in the village due to the congested huts, lack of toilets and the water problem. In recent weeks an epidemic of measles broke out. In 1985 there were 89 cholera patients, but in 1999 the figure rose to 389. Two cholera patients died over the last year.

Most patients have to transfer to Chilaw hospital, 24 kilometres from Udappuva. But only two buses to Chilaw operate three or four times a day, and then not according to a timetable. After six in the evening there is no transport, even in emergencies, to carry a patient to hospital.

The owners of the big fishing nets dominate the lives of fishermen. In the fishing industry at Udappuva one can see remnants of the old feudal relationships combined with new capitalist relations. The net owners hire about 60 or 70 workers for six months—the length of the fishing season in the area. A worker is paid for the six months according to their job—from 20,000 rupees ($US280) to 40,000 rupees ($US550). The worker is not permitted to work for any other employer during these six months—in reality he belongs to the owner. If he does not attend work, next day the employer will force him to work—either himself or with the help of the police.

After the fish are caught every day, one-third of the income goes to the fishing gear owner, one-third for the day's expenses, such the meals, and the remaining third goes to workers. From the worker's share, any advance payment made to him is deducted. There are about 28 net owners at Udappuva and about 60 boat owners who also hire one or two workers to help them. What dominates in Udappuva is fishing with nets. It is a difficult job. Workers have to use rafts, or theppam, made from three logs fitted together to take the nets out to sea. Then the nets are hauled in from the beach.

Iyengra Kumar, who works for net owner, said: “I have been doing this job since my young days. We go to the seashore at dawn and come back at about six or seven in the evening. We can't say exactly what our daily income will be. We have no permanent income. During the fishing season if the sea gets rough we can't go out and we don't have enough money for expenses.”

The fishermen are forced to migrate. During the six months that the sea gets rough, they used to fish in areas such as Mannar, Kokilai, Naiaru, Mulaithivu, Trincomalee and Batticaloa on the north and east coasts. But because of the ongoing war by the Sri Lankan government against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, fishing in those places has become difficult. Now the fisherman have to obtain police permission and businessmen are reluctant to hire fishing gear in case fighting breaks out and the equipment is lost.

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