

# Conditions in Colombo's shanties highlight Sri Lanka's housing crisis

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As is usual at election times, those who live in the shanty towns that proliferate in Sri Lanka's capital of Colombo are suddenly finding political figures from the ruling Peoples Alliance (PA) and the opposition United National Party (UNP) in their midst. PA and UNP election candidates, flanked by their supporters walking uneasily along the narrow laneways, occasionally stopping for friendly chats and touting for votes, are, at the moment, quite a common sight.

Along with other election pledges, the PA promise to provide "houses suitable to live in for everybody." The UNP, which ruled Sri Lanka for 17 years before the PA came to power in 1994, states in its election manifesto: "We will work towards giving a house to every Sri Lankan, will encourage house ownership and will erase outstanding housing loans."

Few people believe the promises. After all, the same pledges made by the same candidates—or their forerunners—have circulated in previous elections. But housing conditions have continued to worsen.

In the shanties, the reality hits one in the face. According to official statistics, 66,022 families live in 1,506 shanty and slum areas in dwellings—they do not warrant being called "houses"—without proper sanitary facilities. The figure amounts to 51 percent of the total population of Colombo proper—leaving out the surrounding suburbs.

Most of the shanties have no proper access roads. Inside the shanty towns there are narrow footpaths not wide enough for two people to pass. The paths are full of potholes filled with garbage that fails to dry out even in the hot sun. During the rainy season the houses are flooded with contaminated dirt. Small naked children play in the holes since they have nothing else to do. Water-borne diseases such as cholera and diarrhea are common, as are malaria and chronic skin diseases.

A 55-year-old mother of four, who lives in the Babapulle colony in central Colombo, explained: "Black clouds in the sky create fear. If it rains heavily for three or four hours the water level will rise to knee height even inside the houses. There are 350 houses in this colony but not a single common lavatory or water tap for drinking and washing. There is no proper drainage system. When we complained to the government and the council we were told that we would be given houses instead of shanties. None of us got a house."

Other shanties are no better. Dwellers at Grandpass, Kosgas junction, Armour Street, Bodhirajapura, Samagipura and Stacepura lack sufficient lavatories and water facilities. The lavatories that do exist have no doors.

The PA coalition, which includes the old bureaucratic "left" leaderships, has initiated a scheme known as Thirasara Purawara (sustainable housing). Housing Minister Indika Gunawardhena, a leader of the Stalinist Communist Party of Sri Lanka, prides himself for being "the pilot of the Thirasara Purawara program, making available space to develop Colombo and supplying housing for shanty dwellers." The program's real aim, however, is not to provide decent homes for Colombo's poor but to free up land currently occupied by shanties for commercial purposes.

Real Estate Exchange Ltd, a company formed by various government authorities to implement the program, outlined its main aim as follows: "To attract direct foreign investment to Colombo, the leading commercial centre of Sri Lanka, it is essential to provide inner city space, infrastructure facilities as well as cheap labour. The era of keeping economic policy related to lands in Colombo under government authority has ended. In a transparent economy, land must be released for the use of investment promotion."

The company also made clear its indifference to the shanty-dwellers' future. "This community, the majority among whom are encroachers, has no legal right to dwell on these lands—physically, socially or economically," it declared.

The government has begun "a sustainable housing project" in the city's oldest and largest colony—Vanathamulla, a 200-acre shanty with over 3,500 dwellings situated close to the construction of a new super highway. Known as Sahashra Puraya (Millennium City), the project was inaugurated in March last year and construction began in December. The first floor of the 14-story block of flats was completed last June, but soon after began to collapse. When people from the shanty complained, the officials responded by assuring them that the floor would be rebuilt after construction was complete.

One worker commented: "We have lived in a hellhole for years. Now we realise that exchanging our house for a flat is not for the better. It was shocking to see the collapse of that floor. What will happen if the same thing occurs after we move

into these flats?”

People living in the area have been given an “ownership card” in exchange for a promise to give up the land on which their present dwellings are situated. Government authorities have told them that the cards are worth the current market value of the land and have promised them a flat.

The government has not advised what the total cost will be. Each family has to pay 25,000 rupees (\$US320) to obtain the key of a flat in the complex—an amount that will not be deducted from the overall price. In addition, residents will have to pay maintenance costs and electricity and water fees.

It is unlikely, however, that the shanty-dwellers will ever receive a flat. The only things that are certain are that they will lose any right to the valuable land on which they are currently dwelling and that someone is going to make a hefty profit. Parts of the building will be sold off for a supermarket and shopping complex.

One woman remarked: “We won't get a flat unless we pay 25,000 rupees. We have been asked to pay, even if it forces us into debt. If the rent is not paid for a few months, the flats will be taken back. If water and electricity bills aren't paid the services will be disconnected. Is there any black magic [we can use] to earn this money?”

About a quarter of those who live in Vanathamulla are small traders—some of them get a small income by raising a few pigs, chickens or cows. If they want a flat they will have to give up their income. The unemployed have no hope of obtaining the necessary funds. Most will be forced to leave the city and the land will be sold off to businesses.

The shanties emerged in the days of British colonial rule but expanded when the UNP government began to introduce its free market policies in 1977. The poor from the suburbs and rural areas flocked to the city to try to make a living as labourers in the port or wholesale establishments, as municipal sanitary workers and rickshaw operators. The actual unemployment rate in the shanties is much higher than official figures. According to a study published in 1997, 50 percent of workers in the Vanathamulla area are unemployed and 90 percent do not have permanent employment.

The shanties are just the sharpest expression of a housing crisis throughout Colombo. Many families have come to the city from the villages and are forced to pay a large portion of their meagre salaries on rent. A government worker earns a monthly salary of 5,000 rupees, while a labourer earns about 3,000 rupees. Yet the monthly rent for a two-bedroom house with electricity and running water is about 8,000 rupees (\$US102). Most workers have to settle for a house without water or power, or rent a single or double room in a house or flat.

Only the relatively well-off can consider buying a house. Sections of the middle class who have done so with the help of a bank loan often find it very difficult to meet the interest and loan repayments. The price for a perch of land (one perch is

about 25 square metres) within the Colombo city limits ranges from 100,000 to one million rupees or even higher—a figure far beyond the reach of most families. In 1997, the commercial banks held housing loans amounting to 597 million rupees—90 percent of these were to people in the Colombo district.

Elsewhere in the country, families are forced to live in cramped, unhygienic conditions. According to the 1997 Central Bank Report, 24.6 percent of houses in Sri Lanka are mud-walled, 27 percent are mud-floored and in coastal areas 11 percent of the population live in thatched houses or houses made of wood planks and metal sheets.

Most fishing communities have no toilet facilities or safe drinking water. Hundreds of thousands of plantation workers and their families have lived for generations in dwellings known as “lines”—long huts divided into 10 by 12 foot rooms, one for each family. More than 60 percent of housing does not offer proper protection against the elements and is not finished with modern building materials.

At the same time there is no shortage of modern office blocks and shopping complexes in Colombo. The wealthy have no difficulty building spacious mansions with well-groomed gardens and more rooms than they know what to do with. The price of a luxury house in the capital ranges up to 10 million rupees and more. A complex of luxury flats with access to swimming pools, playgrounds and shops recently advertised units for a monthly rent of 80,000 rupees—more than two years wages for an ordinary labourer.

The resources exist to provide decent housing for ordinary working people as well as to build hospitals, schools, and sporting and cultural facilities. But under the present social and economic order, what is constructed is determined by profit, not the social needs of the majority. The Socialist Equality Party advocates the allocation of the billions of rupees that will be necessary to provide high quality public housing for the poor, low interest loans to those who wish to build a house, and to provide clean water, electricity, sewerage and other basic facilities to every household. Empty houses should be taken over and used to house the homeless at nominal rents.



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