

On-the-spot report

Government leaves thousands of flood victims in eastern Sri Lanka without adequate aid

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More than 100,000 families, or nearly half a million people, have been affected by severe flooding that began on November 19 in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka. Three people died—one was washed away and two others drowned.

Most have returned to their villages, but many have found that their wattle and daub huts have been damaged or washed away altogether. They are exposed to the danger of epidemics due to lack of clean water, adequate food and proper shelter.

Those to whom we spoke were angered by the Peoples Alliance government's indifference to their plight. Little or nothing has been provided in the way of food or other assistance, and in some cases government officials have not even visited the affected areas.

Most of the flooded areas are in the eastern districts of Batticaloa and Amparai, where the majority of people are poverty-stricken farmers and fishermen belonging to the minority Tamil and Tamil Muslim communities.

The government announced last week that it had allocated 1.25 million rupees for flood victims—the equivalent of about 2.50 rupees per person. When we spoke to the chief administrative officer in Batticaloa he claimed that 5.25 million rupees had been set aside for the refugees. Even on this figure, the assistance amounts to only 10 rupees or about 25 US cents per person.

The East is a battleground in the protracted civil war between the Sri Lankan army and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). As a result, some of the flooded areas are in LTTE-controlled territory and little is known about the fate of flood victims there. Several people told us that according to their relatives, the impact of the flood is even greater than in government-controlled areas, where villagers have some access to basic supplies and medical assistance.

People are allowed to move in and out of LTTE-controlled areas, but it is mainly the elderly who do so to sell their produce. Young people fear being arbitrarily detained by the security forces as “LTTE suspects”. Soldiers check through bags for any banned goods, including diesel, petrol or kerosene. Limits are placed on essential items—only 2kg of rice is permitted, 1kg of sugar, one box of matches and two disinfectants.

In the government-controlled Batticaloa district, at least 10,000 houses have been washed away and tens of thousands more have been damaged. Large areas of paddy field have been destroyed along with other crops, raising the prospect of starvation.

We visited Eravur Sittandi, a peasant village 13 kilometres from Batticaloa town, where 415 families took refuge at the Sittandi Vandarmolle Tamil college. On the way there, on both sides of the highway from Batticaloa, all the houses we saw were abandoned as a result of the war. Many were completely destroyed; others had their doors and windows removed. Some of the abandoned houses were used as army posts.

The college at Sittandi was small—three buildings with only half-built walls. There was no protection from the dense swarms of mosquitoes that invade at night. Last week it housed more than 1,325 people, including the elderly and infants, from Udaya Mulai and Madhurankadu villages who could not return home due to the damage to their houses.

Some of those sheltering in Sittandi took us back to their villages to show us the devastation caused by the floods. The only way to reach Madhurankadu and Udaya Mulai is to walk along gravel roads. Both are poor villages where most people earn a living as hired labour or collecting firewood from the nearby jungle.

One cannot see a tiled roof in either village—all the huts are made of clay and bamboo or wood (wattle and daub). Most have no lavatory. At Udaya Mulai, there is a small school; not worthy of being called a school—a building with a coconut thatch roof.

The floods have washed away or seriously damaged most of the huts. The school was under water after three days of rain. All paddy fields at Madhurankadu were under water and villagers said they would not be able to cultivate them again for months.

The air was filled with the unbearable stench of decomposing carcasses of cattle and other animals. One villager told us that three persons had to be hospitalised as they became badly infected after being involved in removing the dead animals.

Very few people were able to save their belongings as the

water level had initially risen over a metre in one hour early in the morning. “All our kitchen, including utensils and our children's books, have gone. I now have only the dress I wore when we fled the area,” one woman explained. Villagers just managed to evacuate small children at Swami Nadarajah orphanage at Udaya Mulai.

The refugees spoke contemptuously of the government and its aid. “For a whole week a family of five persons was given only 135 rupees (\$US1.60), a family of four 108 rupees and 90 rupees for a family of three. With 135 rupees we were able to buy three kilos of rice, 100 grams of dhal and some curry powder,” one said.

A mother accused government authorities of ignoring the flood victims. “We have been able to just manage at the starvation level because we received 600 rupees from World Vision, (a non-governmental organisation).”

No sanitary facilities exist in either village and eye infections, diarrhoea and skin diseases are beginning to spread. The villagers have some medicines supplied by the International Red Cross but access to other medical care is limited.

The conditions at Madhurankadu and Udaya Mulai are not exceptional. A school teacher told us that 70 percent of people in the Batticaloa live in poverty and 99 percent of the flood victims are from those families.

The number of children going to school is falling and we only came across a handful of youth who have studied up to the Ordinary Level (year 11). “We are forced to stop educating children when they reach 10-15 to send them to earn a living,” one mother explained.

Even with the devastation caused by the floods, many are unable to work outside the district because of the stringent security measures imposed by the military. A young person in a refugee centre told us he had been at a paddy mill in the North Central Province but had to leave after the army threatened him with arrest.

We also visited Seelamunai, a fishing area near Batticaloa, where people had similar stories to tell. They lost most of their belongings, and only managed to save their lives by using their boats. About 250 families were left homeless and for four days they had no food and were starving. “We did not receive any aid from the government,” they said.

Most people in the village earn a living fishing in the lagoon with boats and nets. But they are paid low prices and the poverty they face is evident from their clothes and huts. When we arrived, a large crowd gathered to tell us about their situation.

“No authority will help us to rebuild our houses, we have to help each other. If we wait expecting something from the government we will lose even the remains of the houses,” they said.

“But even with these difficulties we can't do our job (fishing) peacefully. We can't go from the lagoon to the sea after seven at night. Even fishing in the lagoon is decided by the army. We

hire a boat for 50 rupees a day. But we can only earn 150 or 200 rupees a day. Sometimes we are able to only pay for the boat and earn nothing.”

One flood victim complained: “Not a single parliamentarian has come to see us. A few months back they came to talk to us but only to collect our vote. They have not given us any help now.”

Government neglect is also responsible for the severity of the flooding. Large low-lying areas in the districts surrounding Amparai, Badulla, Trincomalee and Polonnaruwa are threatened with flooding every year during the monsoon. A number of rivers, including the Mundeni Aru and Magalawatawan Aru, flow into a lagoon some 100 kilometres long but the movement of water into the sea is hindered by sand that has collected at the lagoon outlet.

The heavy rainfall over 10 days in mid-November swelled the rivers and the dozens of small tanks [man-made dams and lakes] to overflowing. The Mahaweli River, the longest and the largest in Sri Lanka, which flows through the borders of Batticaloa district, burst its banks and flooded surrounding areas. Three tanks, including Agastier kulam and Tharvai kulam, the two largest in the area, were breached at weak points. Huge amounts of water that flowed into the lagoon, was unable to escape into the sea and rapidly flooded low-lying areas.

For years, successive governments have ignored recommendations for the construction of a proper drainage system in the district. The tanks, roads, culverts and lagoon opening have all suffered through the lack of maintenance. A top government official in the area, who spoke to us under condition of anonymity, emphasised that the war was to blame for the situation.

The truth is that the fate of poor farmers and fishermen throughout the country is a matter of complete indifference for governments, both present and past.



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