Sri Lankan government opens housing project in bid for votes

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Desperate to garner votes in the December 5 election in Sri Lanka, the ruling Peoples Alliance (PA) has rushed through the opening of a public housing project in Colombo City. The government is promoting the development, known as Sahasapura or Millennium City, as a model for solving the immense housing problems facing the country's poor.

However, closer inspection reveals that the facilities in these high-rise housing units are limited and many of those who are supposed to benefit will be unable to pay the costs. The main purpose of the project is not to solve the housing crisis but to free up prime land, previously occupied by housing colonies or slums, for industrial and business development.

The scheme is situated in what is known as the 66 colony, part of the Vanathamulla settlement, one of the oldest and largest in Colombo City. There are around 3,000 makeshift homes in the area, with an even larger number of families. Under the PA's Thirasara Purawara (Sustainable Township) program, the Real Estate Management Ltd (REEL) company was formed by a number of government agencies to construct a five-wing, 14-storey complex with 671 units. It was opened on November 28, just one week before election day, and the units handed over to selected families amid great fanfare.

The local candidate for the opposition United National Party (UNP) complained to the Election Commissioners that the government was distributing housing units to voters as bribes. When the Housing Minister accused the UNP of opposing the provision of houses for people, the opposition candidate quickly shut up.

Prior to its opening, the project was off-limits to all outsiders, including journalists. But a *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team managed to piece together a picture of the conditions that residents will face. From the outside, the high-rise building is colourfully painted with a new modern look. Inside, however, the facilities are poor.

There are four sizes of flats—from 31 to 56 square metres [335 to 600 square feet]—which are offered to families on the basis of the floor space of their former dwellings. In two types, the bathroom is miniscule—one metre by one metre. The other two designs combine the bathroom and toilet but again it is anything but spacious. Three of the designs have no kitchen at all, simply a concrete slab for a gas cooker and other items.

On each floor, there are five communal laundry facilities. A group of mothers commented angrily: "Because the bathrooms in the new flats have no space, even for someone to move around, we will have to use these laundry points [to wash]. Definitely we will have to pay to maintain them. They [the company] will decide everything—where we can take our bath, where we can wash our clothes. We will be reduced to puppets."

The makeshift character of the project was underscored by comments from a group of workers who explained: "We are fixing the drainage line for the building. Do you know where we are going to fix these lines? It is the very, very old gully used for the 66 housing colony, on which this building has been erected. We are busy finishing this before the opening ceremony."

REEL boasts that its flats are of a high standard and "suitable for any income group in the society". But as some residents explained, the new flats were smaller than their previous shanties. "In addition we will have to pay for washing our clothes. We lived in the colony for about 20 years. This project is a kind of punishment to us. The government is going to demolish our houses

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and sell the lands to companies. Who will benefit from such a program?"

Of the 280 hectares of land previously covered by shanty settlements in Colombo City, only 120 hectares will be used to build flats to rehouse the residents. The remaining 160 hectares will be sold off for commercial purposes—no doubt at a hefty profit.

The Housing Minister claims the flats are distributed free to former residents of the housing colony. But as one resident explained: "The statement that these houses are provided to us free is a damn lie. The government distributes these houses because they have taken over our land. In addition, an initial payment of 25,000 rupees has to be deposited with the REEL company. They claim the money is a saving deposit and that maintenance will be financed from the interest.

"The houses are allocated according to the floor space of our old house. For example, the minimum floor space of the newly built houses is 335 square feet. If the floor area of the old house is 150 square feet then the family is considered eligible for a 335 square feet house. If one's old house is less than 150, however, then you have to pay an additional sum to occupy a house."

Many poorer families will have great difficulty paying the deposit of 25,000 rupees on top of fees for electricity, water and other services. The amount is equivalent to more than six months wages for a lot of workers.

When we spoke to residents in the nearby Dump Estate, so-called because it is situated on an old garbage tip, they said there were no plans to provide them with new flats. A housewife commented: "We would like to move but we are not provided with new houses. They [the authorities] say that we will get houses later. Who knows when? There is a marsh under this Dump Estate. So it has no value. That's why our turn have been postponed."

The limited projects that are being constructed are not enough to satisfy the needs of the poor in Colombo or the rest of the country.

In its Annual Report in 1996, the Central Bank estimated that there was a shortage of 171,599 houses and that another 70,000 homes were needed each year to cope with demand. Actual construction up to the end of the year 2000 was only 336,802 housing units, leaving a shortfall over five years of nearly 200,000. In fact, according to Central Bank reports, the construction rate is slowing—only 42,225 dwellings were commenced in 2000 as compared to 81,662 in 1999—and is expected to decline further as the economy slows.

The worst affected area is Colombo, where 51 percent of the population live in 66,000 shanties and slums in 1,500 settlements. Around 11,000 of the shanties, located next to roads, railways and canals, have been threatened with eviction with no promise of new housing.

The governing PA and the opposition UNP have both stated in their election campaigns that, if elected, they will provide everyone with proper housing. The two major parties are, however, committed to implementing the IMF's economic restructuring agenda which calls for cutbacks to government spending, particularly in areas such as public housing, welfare, education and health. Just as after previous elections, campaign promises on housing will be rapidly torn up.

The real priorities can be seen in the figures for government spending for the year 2000. The total spent on all areas of public housing in rural and urban areas was 1.4 billion rupees—a tiny fraction of the 85 billion rupees squandered on the military budget to prosecute the ongoing civil war in the North and East of the island. Any solution to the housing crisis, as with other issues, is bound up with ending the war and reorganising society on socialist lines to meet the pressing needs of working people, not the profit requirements of a wealthy few.

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