

Nearly one million left homeless by Sri Lankan floods

Our correspondents
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The extent of the disaster caused by the floods and consequent landslides in Sri Lanka since May 17 is now emerging. Hundreds of people are dead and nearly a million more have been displaced. Many have been left without any government assistance and are struggling just to obtain the basic necessities of life.

According to conservative estimates issued by the Social Welfare Ministry last Thursday, 264 people have died in the worst floods since 1947 in five southern districts. Some 175,896 families or about 800,000 persons have been displaced, including some 200,000 schoolchildren. At least 15,197 houses have been completely destroyed, while another 26,284 houses have been partly damaged.

The ministry stated that 137 bodies have been found in the worst hit district of Ratnapura, 80 in Matara, 22 in Hambantota, 17 in Galle and eight in Kalutara. Most of the victims in Ratnapura were buried alive in landslides that wiped out whole families. The actual death toll may be much higher as more than 500 people are still missing. Some areas, such as Deniyaya in Matara district, had not been reached by last Friday as roads were washed away. Some areas are still inundated with water.

In many areas, electricity and telephone lines are cut and authorities have declared that it will be days before services are restored. Substantial areas of paddy fields and other crops have been destroyed. On a number of small tea estates, the tea bushes have been damaged by mudslides.

Yet despite the extent of the disaster, the United National Front (UNF) government has allocated a pittance for relief measures—a mere 17.29 million rupees (about \$US180,000) or just 22 rupees a head for the estimated 800,000 displaced persons.

Minister of Power and Energy Karu Jayasuriya, who heads the country's disaster management subcommittee, declared the floods to be "biggest natural disaster" the country has faced in decades. The comment underscores the failure, not only of the present government, but of previous ones to develop any contingency plans for floods, landslides or other catastrophes.

The government's only emergency measure has been to dispatch several units from the armed forces to help some of the victims. Moreover, the disaster is not purely a "natural" calamity. Lack of government controls on deforestation, gem

mining and quarrying greatly increased the danger of land- and mudslides in the flood-affected areas.

Even the Divisional Secretariat Office in Ratnapura [the regional government administration] was cut off by floods leaving the Divisional Secretary stranded as he was discussing what to do about the rising waters with his officers. Most of the administrative offices in Ratnapura had no boat even though the area is known to be flood prone.

Elapatha Divisional Secretary P. A. Muthukumarana told our reporters last week that there were no government coordinated relief measures. Another officer explained that they had no machinery to clear away a landslide to reach flood-affected areas.

WSWS reporters visited some of the worst hit areas in Ratnapura District. At the Abeyapura housing scheme in Palewela, more than 70 people were buried in a landslide. The villagers received no assistance to recover and bury the bodies but had to do it themselves with the assistance of the village officer.

At the Ratnakara School, some refugees explained that only five people who were caught in the Abeyapura landslide were saved. One young mother, Lali, who was buried up to her neck, was rescued. But her seven-year-old son, who was also dug out, later succumbed to his injuries in hospital. Some villagers survived the flood by spending the night out in the open on high ground. About 150 people clambered onto small rocks to avoid drowning.

People sheltering at the Ratnakara School did not have basic medicines. A 70-year-old woman at Palawela complained that she did not feel well but could not even get a paracetamol tablet. Several young babies—a seven-month and a two-year-old—were suffering from fever but had no medicine.

The flood victims were dependent mainly on the support of local people who responded to the disaster by providing assistance. Private donors provided much of the food for refugees.

In Yatikadurawa, near Ratnapura, small-scale landslides are still visible on the main Ratnapura-Kalawana road for around 500 metres. There were about 15 houses in the area with about 150 people who fled to the street when the walls started to crack. Police told them to leave but they had nowhere to go.

Most worked in rubber plantations as tappers. Chandrika Wijeratna, 35, told the WSWs: “What we need is a temporary place where we can build a shelter. Even a mud hut is okay.” K A Premawathi joined in, explaining that the local people had asked successive governments and the local divisional secretariat for land since 1977 but to no avail. “The rich people have 100 or 200 acres of land, but we don’t even have five perches [125 square metres] to build a shelter over our heads,” another worked added.

Most of the victims in the Ratnapura District are poor. Many work in the gem mines for 75 to 100 rupees (\$US1 or less) per week. If a gem is found, a worker will get just 2 percent of its value. A day labourer receives 125 to 150 rupees.

A social worker from Ratnapura told the WSWs that people are becoming angry. “This disaster hits people and they don’t know what is going to happen them. Some are on the road, some are with friends or relatives. Some have gone to refugee camps in schools,” he said. He pointed to the danger of epidemics, explaining that there is no clean water. “We know of fever spreading at some camps.”

In the Ratnapura and Matara districts, cases of diarrhea, viral flu and typhoid cases have already been reported. The Ministry of Health announced that five cases of diarrhea and 50 cases of viral flu are being treated in Pothupitiya, 45 km from Ratnapura town. Dr T A Kulathilake, Director of the Epidemiological Unit, warned that these two districts are also susceptible to dengue and Japanese encephalitis. Diarrhea was also reported among plantation workers in the Elapatha and Millawitiya plantations in the Ratnapura District.

A volunteer health camp organiser in Ratnapura told the WSWs: “In Ratnapura you can find people with influenza, fever and respiratory diseases everywhere. We have treated over 300 patients in two clinics held at the Ratnakara school and the Weragama temple in Palawela. Only now has the government started to establish some mobile and stationary clinics. But most of the health camps are still run by volunteers. The only health camp with good facilities in this area is the one run with the assistance of the Indian Government.”

Stories are same in other districts. Our reporters visited an area in the Hambantota District where 22 people were buried in a landslide. Four houses and a school were completely covered. The death toll could have been much higher but fortunately no one was at the school or in the teachers’ quarters at the time. Government officers have warned that landslides could occur again in the area. But last week there were still 10 families living in the area as they had nowhere to go and the government had taken no steps to find them a safe place to stay.

In Walivitiya-Divithura area in the Galle District, which was severely affected by floods, many people were cut off for days. Only four small boats were available for relief work. A senior government official from the Divisional Secretariat announced last Thursday that approval to allocate money for relief had finally been given. Up to that point, officials had to ask

cooperative societies for credit to buy limited aid.

The government-owned newspaper *Daily News* reported on May 22 that people could obtain pumps to clean their well from the Hambantota local government chairman or administrative officer. Most refugees, however, were in no position to get or use the pumps without assistance, which was not available. About 3,000 acres of paddy cultivation have been destroyed in the district and the irrigation system has been severely damaged. Coming after a serious drought in the Hambantota District last year, the flood damage will severely affect the livelihood of many farmers in the area.

In the midst of this crisis, the government, the opposition and the media have all been appealing to the public to provide assistance and declaring that it is the responsibility of “society” to help the victims. And many ordinary people, who are genuinely concerned about the terrible situation facing those left homeless and destitute, have responded generously. But the real issue that needs to be addressed is why successive governments have done nothing to prepare for such a disaster and why so little aid has been forthcoming when the extent of the damage did become known.

Flood relief has simply become another issue in the ongoing struggle for power between the UNF government and President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who heads the opposition Peoples Alliance. Kumaratunga has established her own “Disaster Preparedness Presidential Task Force” in competition with the government’s newly created Ministry for Human Disaster Management. Each is blaming the other for the lack of assistance for the victims. Kumaratunga has accused the government of blocking funds while the new minister has accused the president of not giving him legal powers. This cynical political infighting simply highlights the fact that no section of the ruling class has the slightest concern for the plight of ordinary working people.



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