

Millions affected by drought in Sri Lanka

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2 September 2004

About three million people, mostly poor rural farmers, have been severely affected by a drought throughout 14 of the 25 districts in Sri Lanka. Some have been unable to cultivate their land at all this season. Others have lost their crops. As a result, many have been left without any income and are now threatened with starvation.

According to statistics released by Irrigation Department, 34 of the country's 58 major reservoirs and tanks (artificial lakes) are below 25 percent of full capacity. The worst affected districts are Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa in north central province, Kurunegala and Puttalam in northwestern province, Hambantota in southern province, Monaragala in Uva province and Matale in central province.

In these areas, 37 tanks used for irrigating farmlands are at just 13 percent of capacity. In Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Kurunegala districts, the levels at several major tanks and most small tanks are below their sluice gates, making it impossible to supply any water for farming. Even these levels are falling rapidly.

Crops have been severely affected. In the Anuradhapura division, for instance, the proportion of paddy lands cultivated this *Yala* (June-September) season has fallen from the usual 60 percent to just 4 percent of the total arable land of 69,000 acres. Some 158,000 families have lost their livelihoods. Of those, 90,000 families confront a severe lack of drinking water. Water levels in wells have dropped dramatically and many have dried up. In most areas there is a single tube well for hundreds of families.

In the Polonnaruwa district, the major tanks are well below their usual level. One major tank, Parakrama Samudhraya, has irrigated 30,000 acres of paddy fields so far. But an additional 8,000 acre-feet of water is needed to keep irrigating until the end of the season. Local crops are under threat because the water is unlikely to be available. The main channel from the

tank has been closed since August 30.

Assistant Irrigation Director Marasinghe told the *World Socialist Web Site* that a catastrophic situation was developing. "The Minneriya tank has been able to provide water for only 55 percent of total cultivatable paddy fields areas. We [normally] have to release water five more times up to the end of the season. But there is only 13,500 acre-feet of water [available]—i.e., sufficient only for two releases. Out of 10,000 acres of paddy fields fed by the Giritale tank only 40 percent has been cultivated this time. There too, the tank does not have sufficient water—4,000 acre-feet—to keep supplying water until the harvest."

Many farming families have been devastated. The lack of water has meant that they have lost money and months of work. Farmers will have to go further into debt to get the means to plant the next crop later this year or early next year. One farmer in Medirigiriya explained: "If we undertake to cultivate a paddy field with one measure [22 kilograms] of paddy seeds, under the share cropping method we have to provide 15 measures of the harvest to the landowner. Now we are debtors due to that."

Another local farmer, I.P. Jayasinghe, explained that he could not plant any crops this season. He had no money to pay back loans that were due in six months and was facing a desperate situation. "If we mortgage our paddy fields, the right to cultivate them will be transferred to the mortgage owner. We have to sell our stocks of seed just to live. Some people mortgage their jewelry and household equipment.

"We can't find work. Our children have to work after school. Some young people have left the village looking for a job in Colombo. Our eldest son works there and comes home once every two months. He can only give us about 1,500 rupees each time. He receives just 5,000 to 6,000 rupees a month with overtime, but he spends most of that for his maintenance."

Medirigiriya Assistant Divisional Secretary D.W. Dayananda said many people lacked drinking water. As an emergency measure, plastic water tanks were distributed among the 96 village divisions in the area—three per division—to provide drinking water. He pointed out, however, that this was not nearly enough because more than 75 percent of the 17,200 families in the area were affected. The distribution of water is limited by a lack of tankers, sub-standard vehicles and restrictions imposed by the Water Supply Board.

Many people are compelled to walk for kilometres to obtain drinking water and to wash. The lack of clean water has led to an outbreak of related diseases. Medirigiriya official Dayananda explained that by August 12 local health officials were reporting some eight cases of diarrhea a day. Skin diseases were also spreading due to the use of unclean water for bathing.

Although the drought has been developing since January, the previous United National Front (UNF) government took no significant steps to alleviate the crisis. The current United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government won the April election, in part by appealing to rural disaffection, but its attitude toward the rural poor is no different from its predecessor.

After months of delay, the UPFA cabinet finally approved a disaster relief fund of 658 million rupees (\$US6.4 million) on August 12. After a further delay by Treasury, the first allocation of just 200 million rupees was made on August 18, followed by another 400 million rupees on August 24. But the money is limited to providing emergency aid and will cover only half a million of the worst affected families. Even then those receiving aid will be compelled to work on government projects in return.

In comments to the *Sunday Times*, Social Service Minister Sumedha Jayasena indicated that the government was seeking help from foreign governments and non-government organisations. “We have already received aid from Pakistan—8.4 million rupees [\$US81,000] worth of dry rations,” she said. The minister attempted to blame the previous government for “spending money irrationally” but did not announce any further financial assistance to ease the suffering.

In the Medirigiriya area, Dayananda explained that a request had been made for 1.5 million rupees for drinking water but only 700,000 rupees had been

provided. Local authorities had to rely on non-government organisations for assistance, he said, but that was not enough. Moreover, government aid was limited to providing dry food rations and a monthly payment of 1,420 rupees (\$US14) per family.

According to district officials, although 230 million rupees are needed for relief in Anuradhapura district, only 50 million rupees have been allocated. For 130,000 affected families in Kurunegala district, only 50 million rupees have been provided.

Drought-affected farmers have complained that they received no compensation even though they subscribed to a government-run agriculture insurance scheme. Anuradhapura District Secretary U.D. Yapa called an emergency disaster committee meeting with River Basin and Rajarata Development Minister Maithripala Sirisena but economic assistance relief for farmers who lost their crops was not discussed.

The desperate situation is fuelling growing anger in drought-affected areas. According to a report in the *Daily Mirror* on August 19, farmers in the southern area of Wellawaya are furious over the lack of water for drinking and for their paddy fields around the lower Kirindioya River. In protest they broke open dams in the upper parts of the river. Such protests are certain to grow as the drought continues to create widespread suffering and hardship.



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