

On-the-spot report

# Poverty-stricken Hambantota among the worst affected areas in Sri Lanka

Our correspondents  
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Sri Lanka's Hambantota district in the south of the island is one of the areas worst affected by the tsunami that hit on December 26. While the current official death toll claims 4,500 were killed when giant tidal waves washed over the low-lying coastal strip, survivors claim that this figure is a gross underestimate and that no one will ever know the real number of lives lost.

Hambantota district is located about 240 kilometres south of Sri Lanka's capital Colombo. One of the country's most remote and poorest regions, the majority of its population lead a hand-to-mouth existence surviving through fishing, small-scale agriculture, salt farming or tourism. Located next to Yala National Park, Sri Lanka's second largest wild life reserve, the area attracts thousands of visitors each year.

But while tourists come to enjoy its pristine beauty, water shortages constantly plague the district. Over one-third of the 533,000-strong population live below the poverty line, 26.3 percent of all households are officially categorised as poor, and youth unemployment is rampant. The district records one of the country's highest suicides rates, mainly due to endemic poverty.

The devastating impact of the tsunami has now pushed the area's population even deeper into the abyss. Today Hambantota is like a war zone with hundreds of pulverised homes and dwellings, upturned vehicles, uprooted telegraph and phone lines and countless corpses floating in nearby lagoons and mangrove swamps.

A measure of the destruction in Sri Lanka's south is demonstrated by the difficulties *World Socialist Web Site* correspondents encountered getting to the area. The

railway line and much of the coastal road between Colombo, Galle and Matara is destroyed so we made the trip to Hambantota by motorbike, and were forced to take long detours.

Prior to the tidal wave, a journey to Hambantota would take four hours. Our trip took two days. We left early on Tuesday morning and passed hundreds of destroyed houses, twisted rail lines and blocked roads. At one point, the rail line was completely destroyed and 200 metres further on we saw the remains of several bent and upturned carriages. One could only imagine the terrifying deaths suffered by those who were trapped inside.

Unable to get to Galle, we had to travel inland and then, via a series of back roads, were able to reach Matara on the south coast. The journey had taken most of the day. Petrol is scarce and the few petrol stations with fuel had hundreds of people queuing up to secure the now dwindling supplies.

Although Matara is approximately 80 kilometres from Hambantota it took several hours to get there the next day. When we arrived on Wednesday afternoon we witnessed scenes of almost indescribable devastation.

Little of the town is left standing with no water, electricity or telecommunications. The bus station, 17 buses and surrounding buildings were completely destroyed. One thousand houses along the Hambantota-Tissa road, town-council residences, shops and other buildings were wiped out. Many homes had two or three families living in them, and a large Muslim community, which was located near the Hambantota harbour, was completely washed away. So powerful was the tsunami that even houses located one kilometre

inland were demolished.

The main road to Colombo and local byways near the town are completely impassable. They are crowded with hundreds of people flocking to Hambantota to try and locate their relatives and loved ones.

An assistant divisional secretary told the media this week that 500 army personnel were involved in search operations and had located about 2,000 bodies. Apart from the eastern province Mulaithivu and Amparai districts, this is the highest number of deaths reported from any Sri Lankan district. Thousands of bodies have already been buried in mass graves.

We saw 12 trucks full of dead bodies near Karagan saltpan and later, when we attempted to take a photo of some corpses, a police officer ordered us to stop. He told us we had to have permission from the police superintendent. When we contacted him his response was: "First help us get the bodies and then you can take some photos."

When the tsunami hit, hundreds of local people were visiting Sunday markets at Hambantota, Matara and other nearby town markets. In fact, an estimated two to three thousand people were promenading along Hambantota harbour when the tidal wave struck. The overwhelming majority of these would have died.

We spoke with R. Wasantha, who told us about his traumatic experiences: "I was on the upper floor of a building near the town's bus station. At about 9.30 in the morning the massive wave came up and then pulled back, exposing a long area of the coast. About five minutes later another wave struck.

"When the water mass flowed back everything in the bus station and around it, including the buses, three-wheeler vehicles and the buildings, along with people in and around, had been sucked away without a trace. It was an unbelievable and horrifying scene."

About 150 people have taken refuge at Hambantota's Suriyawewa temple. All those we spoke to bitterly denounced the lack of government support. No responsible minister, MP or government official had come to inquire about their conditions, nor had they received any government aid. The survivors told us they had received food and clothing, not from the government, but from voluntary organisations. How long are we supposed to survive on this assistance, they asked.

A group of youth at the camp explained their

desperate situation: "We used to earn a living by doing small trade in the town on a daily basis. This was a big struggle, but what are we going to do now? People have no money. A year ago we had a severe drought, then came the floods, and now a furious tidal wave. We have lost everything. We used to fish but there is no equipment left. How are we going to earn a living now?"

K. Janaka from Orugodalla, Tangalle, about 40 kilometres east of Hambantota, said: "MPs would always visit during elections, but they still haven't bothered to see us or inquire about what we want. We hear from the media that lots of foreign aid is coming, we've received nothing yet."

A young girl from Tangalle fisheries harbour refused to believe that the authorities were not aware of the tsunami and asked why they had not issued a warning. "Why could it not be known, when there is such a high level of technological and scientific development available today?" she asked.

"If there was an early warning from the government or responsible authorities we could have saved lots of precious lives. I heard that the prime minister came here by helicopter and visited several places. But we didn't see him".



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