

Tidal wave wreaks death and destruction throughout Sri Lanka

Our correspondents
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The massive tidal wave that struck Sri Lanka without warning on Sunday morning has left a trail of destruction, suffering and death in its wake. The latest official death toll stands at more than 12,000, but there is still no accurate estimate from some of the worst affected areas. Rescue and relief workers continue to search for bodies among the wreckage. Transport and communications have been severely disrupted.

The tsunami struck the entire eastern and northern coastal belt of the island as well as the southern areas. Houses, businesses, roads, bridges and telecommunications have been damaged or destroyed. According to official estimates, one million people, or 5 percent of the population, have been displaced. Many have lost loved ones, their homes and all their possessions.

The most severe damage has occurred in the North and East, where the country's 20-year civil war has also been centred. The Sri Lankan military estimates the death toll at 2,183 in Amparai; 586 in Trincomalee; 3,700 in Jaffna and Kilinochchi. The final figures will be higher. Officials have admitted that they only have rough estimates for areas under the control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Eyewitness accounts from the southern districts indicate that the official figures—650 dead in Galle and 389 in Matara—are far too low. At a Sunday fair in Matara, hundreds of people were washed into the sea while the entire bus station in Galle was swept away by lashing waves. Television footage has shown thousands fighting for their lives in the swirling water. Much of the historical fort area of Galle has been destroyed.

A resident of Matara told the *Lakbima* newspaper that a column of water seven metres high struck the town. The area, which is situated in a low-lying, broad coastal plain interlaced with lagoons, was in the direct path of

the tsunami. Even under normal circumstances, communication to and from the area is difficult. Now it has completely broken down.

Between Galle and Colombo, on the island's southwestern coast, the affected areas read like a roll call of every township and fishing village. Much of the railway line, which runs down the coast right next to the sea, has disappeared. The track from Ambalangoda to Galle—a distance of 35km—lies below sea level. A train carrying as many as 1,000 passengers was lashed by huge waves, broken in two and swept away.

Overwhelmingly the victims are the poor. For centuries, Sri Lanka's coastal belt has been dotted with fishing villages comprising rudimentary huts covered with wooden planks and corrugated iron roofs. Such dwellings do not provide adequate protection against strong winds, let alone a tidal wave.

Hundreds of small fishing vessels were at sea when the tsunami hit. Nothing indicated that a calamity was about to occur: the sky was still and bright blue and the wind was coming from the land. As far as the fishermen were concerned, this was ideal weather. If it had not been the day after Christmas, many more would have been at sea. Only the poorest—those who could not afford a break for a couple of days—were fishing.

The coastal area immediately north of Colombo, which was certainly not the worst affected, gives a sense of the extent of the damage elsewhere. From Colombo harbour to the mouth of the Kelani River—a distance of 3 kilometres (1.8 miles)—most of the huts were destroyed by sudden flooding. Many of the fishermen who live there are very poor. The few who can afford cement homes rely on remittances from female family members working as housemaids in the Middle East.

WSWS reporters visited Modera, a fishing village just north of Colombo. About 300 families were sheltering in temporary accommodation in St James Church, Shanthi Nivas hostel, St Joseph Church and Wiswyk park.

R. Thanapakkiam described what happened. “I saw the waves rise 10 feet [three metres]. All of us ran—40 families. We were not able to take anything but the clothes that we were wearing,” she said. All of her possessions, valued at more than 100,000 rupees, [\$US1,000] were washed away.

“We had no warning. If there had been, we could have saved something. We have received nothing from the state or the Colombo Municipality [City Corporation]. Here, many voted for the UNP [United National Party] which ran the previous government. A few politicians from that party have visited us, but they did not offer us anything. No one from the government has come to see what has happened to us,” Thanapakkiam explained.

According to a number of reports, the tsunami struck the Sri Lankan coast at around 9.30 a.m.—about three and a half hours after being triggered by a massive earthquake near northern Sumatra. But no warnings were issued.

Dr. Kapila Dahanyake, Professor of Geology at the University of Peradeniya, told the WSWS that it would have been possible to issue a timely alert throughout the country if the proper equipment and facilities had been available. He pointed out that the government had failed to allocate enough money even to repair the limited equipment that was available.

Amid the terrible destruction caused by the tidal wave, the lack of an early warning system is rapidly becoming a sensitive political issue. A report on the US-based ABC network commented: “If Sri Lanka had joined the international communication system designed to advise coastal communities of potential killer waves, the magnitude of the social disaster might have been avoided.”

But the Human Disaster Management Committee, which operates under President Chandrika Kumaratunga, denied any responsibility. A spokesperson told the WSWS: “Disaster management is not concerned with the prevention of disasters, but rather to remedy the effects and to distribute whatever aid is available.”

Another official body, the Disaster Information Centre, made no comment and could not provide a great deal of information. “We only know that thousands have died,” a representative said.

Lalith Weeraratunga, secretary to Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, confessed to Agence France Presse: “We have been complacent. People had been predicting earthquakes and tidal waves, when we felt a few tremors. But obviously we did not take the warnings seriously.”

A conversation reported to the WSWS between a pilot on a tugboat and the pilot station in Colombo harbour provides a sense of the confusion immediately before the tsunami struck. After noticing unusual movements in the water and the appearance of strange foam, the pilot asked whether there was any news about what was happening. He received the answer: “There is a rumor that something is happening, but I am not sure.”

Confronting the greatest disaster to have hit the country in centuries, the entire political establishment is appealing for “unity”. Various appeals for aid have been made. Statements of sympathy have been issued. But their primary aim is to cover up the gross negligence of governments—both present and past—and to deflect growing anger over the level of assistance and relief being provided.

The response within ruling circles stands in stark contrast to that of ordinary working people. Tonnes of food, medicine and clothing have already been collected by voluntary organisations that have sprung up overnight. University students are out on the main roads in Colombo, stopping vehicles and asking for donations. Moreover what relief they are collecting is being freely distributed to Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims alike—a significant development in a country where the ruling elites have spent the past several decades whipping up communal tensions.



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