

Amid the devastation

Sri Lankan president issues appeal for “unity”

Wije Dias
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Two and a half days after the Indian Ocean tsunami devastated Sri Lanka, President Chandrika Kumaratunga finally addressed the nation on the tragedy. Her speech on Tuesday, which consisted of a mixture of obfuscation, evasion and empty sympathy, constituted a confession of bankruptcy on the part, not just of her government, but of bourgeois rule on the island.

Kumaratunga could not even state the facts. The official death toll has risen from 2,200 on Monday to 23,000 on Thursday, and is expected to increase further as emergency workers probe the wreckage and reach more remote areas. An estimated one million people, one in 16 of the population, have been displaced. Many of these live below the official poverty line of 1,000 rupees or \$US10 a month. They have now lost whatever possessions they owned, and their livelihoods. They have nothing to live on.

The president spoke of “deep shock and grief” and expressed her “deepest sympathies” for the victims. But the thrust of her speech was to justify her government’s actions, or lack of them, and to issue an appeal for “unity” in the face of the “natural disaster”. She pledged “speedy relief to all those who have suffered”, the upgrading of the Disaster Management Unit to provide early warnings, and the establishment of a special task force to undertake reconstruction.

None of these promises is credible. In Colombo itself, victims complain they have not even seen a government official, let alone any aid. In Galle, media reports indicate that thousands of victims are without food, clean water or medicines and have been forced to rely on their own limited resources or private aid. On the severely damaged east coast, as well as in the north, information is scanty, but there is no reason to believe that the situation is any different.

Hundreds of thousands of people lack the basic necessities of life and are vulnerable to disease and possibly starvation. Yet little emergency aid is reaching them. The responsibility for this calamity rests not only with governments in Colombo, past and present, and their lack of planning and foresight, but with the major capitalist powers. They are providing a pittance in assistance, but were nevertheless praised by Kumaratunga.

As for reconstruction, it is more than likely that the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government will react in the same manner to this calamity as its predecessors have to disasters in the past. Promises of reconstruction aid evaporate as the immediate crisis passes. For example, the tens of thousands of

people affected by droughts and subsequent flooding several months ago are still waiting for assistance.

Kumaratunga now pledges to provide an early warning system for the future. Yet neither she, her government nor any official agency has explained why no alerts were posted prior to the tsunami. At the very least, the lack of a warning points to confusion and disorganisation when the first reports of a massive earthquake near Sumatra came in. Because there is no tsunami warning system for the Indian Ocean, it was impossible for the Sri Lankan authorities to immediately confirm that a tidal wave was on its way. But the very size of the quake should have prompted efforts to determine what the dangers were. But nothing was done.

Behind the president’s hollow promises lies, not concern for the victims, but a growing fear about the potential political ramifications of the disaster. The political situation in Sri Lanka was already highly unstable prior to Sunday’s tidal wave. A shaky ceasefire continues to hold in the country’s 20-year civil war, but peace talks to end the conflict have stalled since April 2003. Kumaratunga and her UPFA won the elections last April by denouncing the previous government for selling out the country in talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and by pledging to improve living standards. Ten months on, the UPFA faces growing opposition as prices continue to rise and election promises are broken.

The terrible events of this week will only magnify and exacerbate these tensions. Kumaratunga, and the political establishment as a whole, are well aware that the present shock and bewilderment felt by millions could rapidly turn into anger over the government’s failure to provide even limited relief. Kumaratunga’s speech was above all directed at defusing this political time bomb and, at the same time, preparing for the worst.

It was no accident that the president singled out the armed forces and police for special praise. Undoubtedly, the troops and police who have been deployed to the disaster areas have rendered some assistance. Individual soldiers and police officers have exerted themselves to help alleviate the appalling situation confronting ordinary people. But equally, there is no doubt that these same security forces will be utilised to suppress any political opposition that begins to emerge towards the government. The real attitude of the state apparatus was symbolised by the actions of guards at Galle prison on Sunday—as prisoners desperately tried to save

themselves from drowning, at least two were shot dead.

In her speech, Kumaratunga also appealed for national unity, declaring: “It is not possible to deal with a massive natural calamity of this magnitude separately as Sinhalese, Tamils or Muslims. We must all stand together. It is not possible for any one community to rebuild this country. It is also a difficult task for political parties to provide solutions to this greatest challenge on their own. Therefore it is my earnest appeal that in the sacred task of rebuilding this country from this massive destruction, we stand together as one country and one people, irrespective of all differences, transcending the boundaries that divide us.”

The question is raised: why wait for such a tragedy to issue an appeal for unity? Because this was not, in essence, an appeal to the masses of ordinary people. It was, above all, an appeal to Sri Lanka’s ruling elites for a truce in their bitter infighting in order that they can jointly face any outbreaks of opposition and protest in the wake of the tsunami.

Ever since independence in 1948, different layers of the ruling class have whipped up communalism to divide the working class along ethnic lines and to maintain their own tenuous grip on power. Both Kumaratunga’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the opposition United National Party (UNP) are directly responsible for fostering the Sinhala chauvinism that led to civil war, and for continuing a conflict that has cost at least 65,000 lives. Her government depends directly on the support of Sinhala extremist parties such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

Not surprisingly, the same theme of “unity” has been taken up by other sections of the official establishment, some of whom have been appealing for years for a “government of national unity” to end the civil war and to revive the economy through the implementation of savage “restructuring” measures.

The *Daily Mirror* appealed in its editorial for unity, strength and compassion to “alleviate the pain of mind and body that thousands of hapless people suffer.” It praised the decision of the UNP to join with the government in forming an all-party committee to deal with the disaster. The *Island* sounded a similar call, noting that Sri Lankan expatriates had telephoned the newspaper requesting that it promote national unity.

The Joint Business Forum—a grouping of all the main business councils—issued a statement, proclaiming: “We strongly feel that this is the ideal opportunity for all political parties in Sri Lanka to shed their differences and act together in this hour of grave national concern and take the lead in providing moral strength and courage to face this disaster.”

The calls for unity have also been cautiously extended to the LTTE. Devastated by 20 years of war and the full destructive brunt of the tsunami, conditions facing villagers, workers and small businessmen in the North and East are desperate. LTTE officials and army troops have combined in some areas to carry out joint relief operations. In other areas, however, soldiers, in collusion with Sinhala chauvinist thugs, have prevented voluntary relief organisations from entering LTTE-controlled areas.

With this in mind, Kumaratunga’s appeal is also aimed at defusing hostility to the government’s inaction by appealing to the broadly felt sentiment among working people that everyone should assist each other, regardless of ethnicity, language or religion. In

contrast to the government, many individuals have already displayed extraordinary levels of courage, personal sacrifice and generosity.

But the working class has nothing to gain by joining hands with the very political establishment that bears significant responsibility for the extent of the calamity. The self-activity of masses of ordinary working people points to the need to take a further step and build a political movement to rebuild society as a whole from top to bottom, to meet the social needs of the majority, rather than the profits of the wealthy few.

In concluding her speech, Kumaratunga resorted to the time-worn method of the Sri Lankan ruling class: a call for the people to rally behind the country’s religious institutions. She declared December 31 to be a day of national mourning and called on the entire population to attend various places of religious worship at 6.30 p.m. to observe three minutes silence for the dead. There is no doubt that all of the political parties, including the decrepit parties of the “left” and the trade union bureaucracies, will join with Kumaratunga to conduct this fraudulent exercise.

All of them hope to discourage any critical examination of the real causes of the current situation. The calamity confronting hundreds of thousands of people in Sri Lanka, and millions in South Asia, in the wake of the tsunami, was not inevitable, much less an act of the gods. The earthquake that triggered the tidal wave certainly had natural causes, but serious questions remain as to why the consequences were so catastrophic.

Science may not yet be able to predict earthquakes with complete accuracy, but an early warning network exists in the Pacific Ocean to issue alerts about the danger of tsunamis. Why was there no such system in the Indian Ocean? Why are millions of people compelled to live in shoddy accommodation in low-lying areas around the rim of the Bay of Bengal, making them vulnerable not only to tidal waves, but to other natural disasters as well?

When the economic and strategic interests of the ruling elites are at stake, resources and planning abound. Hundreds of billions have been poured into the massive logistical operation required for the illegal invasion and occupation of oil-rich Iraq. Yet the official response to the disaster in South Asia, which has killed tens of thousands and deeply affected millions, is days of delay, no coordination and a few tens of millions of dollars.



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