

Tidal wave brings 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 throughout the island. The latest official death toll is more than 12,000 as no accurate picture has emerged in some of the worst affected areas. Rescue and relief workers are still searching for bodies among the wreckage. Transport and communications have been severely disrupted.

The tsunami struck the entire eastern and northern coastal belt of Sri Lanka as well as the southern areas of the island. 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 affected. Many have lost loved ones, their homes and their possessions leaving them destitute.

The worst affected areas are in the North and East which have borne the brunt of the country's devastating 20-year civil war. The death toll, as provided by the Sri Lankan military, for the various districts includes: Amparai 2,183; Trincomalee 586; Jaffna and Kilinochchi 3,700. The actual figures are likely to be higher. Officials admitted that they were only estimating the number of deaths in areas under the control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Eyewitness accounts from the southern districts make clear that the official death toll—650 for Galle and 389 for Matara—is an underestimate. Hundreds of people at a Sunday fair in Matara were washed into the sea while the entire bus station in Galle was swept away by the waves. Television reports have shown vivid pictures of 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. To date no proper assessment has been made of the death and destruction in the area. Even under normal circumstances, communication to the area is difficult. Now it has completely broken down.

Between Galle and Colombo, the affected areas read like a roll call of all the townships and fishing villages along the southwestern coast. Much of the railway line between the two cities runs directly next to the sea and has been swept away by huge seas. The track from Ambalangoda to Galle—a distance of 35km—was among the worst affected as it is 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, whether in the north, east or the south of the island, have been the poor. For centuries, the 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 huge tidal wave.

Hundreds of small fishing vessels were at sea when the tidal wave hit. Nothing indicated that a calamity was about the strike: the sky was still and bright blue and the wind was coming from the land. As far as the fishermen were concerned, it 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 is certainly not the worst affected, provides an indication of the destruction elsewhere. From Colombo harbour to the mouth of Kelani River—a distance of 3km—most of the huts were destroyed by sudden flooding. Many of the fishermen are very poor. The few who could afford homes made with cement rely on remittances from family members working as housemaids under oppressive conditions in the Middle East.

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

R. Thanapakkiam described what happened when the tsunami struck. “I saw the waves rise 10 feet. 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 have voted for the UNP [United National Party] which ran the previous government. A few politicians from that party have visited us but 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. No warnings were issued, however.

Dr. Kapila Dahanyake, the 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 on Sunday: “If Sri Lanka had joined the international communication system designed to advice 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 is 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 Weeratunga, 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 glimpse into the utter confusion immediately before the tsunami struck. After noticing unusual movements in the water and the appearance of strange foam, the pilot asked if 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 to deal with the terrible situation. Various appeals for aid have been made. Statements of sympathy have been issued. But all of this is to cover up the negligence of governments—present and past—and to deflect the growing anger over the limited assistance and relief being provided.

The cynical response in ruling circles stands in stark contrast to that of ordinary working people. Tonnes of food, medicine and clothing have already been collected in every area by voluntary organisations that have sprung up. University students were out on the main roads in Colombo, stopping vehicles and asking for donations. Moreover, the relief is being freely distributed to Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims alike—a significant development in a country where the ruling elites have whipped up communal tensions over decades.



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