

Sri Lankan tsunami victims speak to the WSWS

Our correspondents
29 December 2004

With more dead bodies being discovered in the southern, eastern and northern coastal areas of Sri Lanka, the authorities admitted on Tuesday that the death toll from last Sunday's tsunami could rise to 25,000. They also warned that epidemics such as diarrhea could rapidly spread as camps become congested with hundreds of thousands of displaced people.

According to the latest figures, the death toll in the war-ravaged north east of the island has risen to more than 8,000, with 500,000 people displaced. A Reuters report quoted social welfare minister, Sumedha Jayasena, declaring, "Dead bodies are washing ashore along the coast. Reports reaching us from the rescue workers indicate there are 25,000 feared dead. We don't know what to do." But many people simply do not believe the government estimates.

WSWS correspondents are traveling to affected areas throughout the country to speak with victims of the disaster. Those we have met already have been keen to discuss their predicament, expressing anger and concern over what they see as the government's disregard for their sufferings.

Matara is one of the worst affected areas in the south. It is still unreachable via the main coastal highway, because only half the road has been cleared. All along the coast, for 160 kilometres south of the capital Colombo, one can see the devastation caused by the tidal wave. It gets worse as we approach Matara.

On the way, people tell us what happened. They relate one particularly tragic incident in Galle, about 45 kilometres from Matara. Half of the Mahamodera hospital was washed away, including the children's ward and the ward for pregnant mothers. Only a few survived.

In Matara, there are several camps for displaced people. About 3,000 are congregated in the Rahula College camp. No government ministers, MPs or other authorities have bothered to visit there yet. When we arrive, people throng about us to tell their stories.

"We were suddenly caught in the huge wave at about 10.30 in the morning. I heard that people in Trincomalee faced a similar situation one hour before us. Why didn't the authorities warn us then?" asks 73-year-old Punchihewa. He is from Totamuna, Matara. In that village alone, about 250 people have died. Punchihewa lost his elder sister and her husband. "We have lost everything. People in the area have buried their loved ones in mass graves, wrapping them in polythene sheets.

"Here we haven't been given even the most basic things. We haven't received anything from the government. There are small

children here. They are in danger."

Neranjana Sarojini (24) states: "We are shocked that we have had to face this sort of tragedy in such a scientifically developed world. Most of the families here have lost one or two. Nineteen out of 20 houses that are made of planks in our area have been destroyed by the sea.

"We are self-employed as shoe-makers to earn money. We have lost all our equipment. What will we do?"

These people saw others as they were sucked into the sea. Some, who went to rescue them, suffered the same fate. There are only two doctors to treat the survivors. Without even mats, people have been forced to sleep on the floor on sheets of newspaper. There are only six toilets. And it is volunteers who are providing food and other necessities.

"This is the most horrendous situation I have ever experienced in my life. Everyone has their own gory story to tell," Harishchandra explains. He has not been directly affected, but is moving around to try and help the others. "This happened on a church day. People came to attend the Sunday fair. Others went to the temple as it was a *poya* day [a full moon, which is observed by Buddhists as a holiday]. Thousands have been affected.

"Why couldn't they [the government] warn us about the impending disaster? They talk about working with scientific developments that are outdated. They argue that we should build the country with old equipment. This is a system where the elite do not care about people, but only for their profits. Can you expect them to defend your interests?

"A few days ago they were spending tens of millions of rupees to commemorate President Chandrika Kumaratunga's 10-year rule. Here in Matara, you saw the biggest *thamasha* for the occasion. But they cannot find the money to feed these disaster-hit people," Harishchandra declares angrily.

In Moratuwa, in the western province of the Colombo district, the whole coastal area has been affected, though not to the same extent as the eastern and southern coast.

The first wave came at 10.05 a.m., and the second at 11.00 a.m. The entire area up to the Galle highway—about 80 or 90 metres—has been affected. Hundreds of small houses built of wood have been destroyed. There are very few brick houses. The people here are fishermen, or small fruit and vegetable sellers.

When the waves came, the inhabitants fled their houses and ran to safer ground. While very few deaths have been reported here, many have suffered injuries. Better-off people living on the other

side of the Galle road also fled. Those with vehicles tried to drive out, but the roads were blocked and there was general panic. Pregnant mothers whose houses were destroyed ran to get help. Some with small children just ran, without knowing where. Three wheelers were carrying up to five or six passengers. There was panic everywhere.

Two youths from Moratuwella tell us that even though people ran away, three died. One woman died from an electric shock.

One young mother, Mala, a fruit seller with three children, explains what happened.

“I was selling fruit when I heard some of my relatives shouting ‘Run, run! The sea water is rising’. I threw my fruit basket down and ran in search of my children. Luckily I found them unharmed. We are very poor. We have no place to go. While we were on the road we saw the waves come in and destroy our houses. We appealed to God. At eleven another wave came in, close to the Galle road.

“My father-in-law is very old. My husband and others took him to the temple. It is difficult for him to live there. My mother-in-law is crying. She is a housemaid. With the help of other people, she recently installed electricity. She got a small TV. But it has all vanished. I am sorry about my children’s education. All their books have been damaged. We have no future. No government has ever helped us. My family has always lived by doing very hard work. Once I went to the Middle East to work, but I was not paid. So I came back without anything. But I still have to pay off the loan.”

In the small area of Madanwatha, also in Moratuwa, all the houses have been destroyed. There used to be 65 families with 300 members in 13 houses. Thushary, 25, the mother of two children tells us that they could see at about 8.30 in the morning that the sea was rough. “But we didn’t care much about it.” At around 10.30, all of a sudden the waves rose about 20 feet in the air. People ran away. One woman, Somawathi, 40, wanted to retrieve her jewelry, but got caught and died.

In this area, many work as labourers, but they don’t have work every day. Their wages are about 250 rupees (approximately \$US2.50) per day. There are also a few fishermen and some carpenters. Piyadasa says, “We had a very hard life. But now we have nothing, we don’t even have food or kitchen utensils. But the main thing is we have no shelter. All of us, women and men, are sleeping on the road.

“What is my children’s future? Not one parliamentary member has visited us—from the UPFA, including the JVP, or from the UNP. I supported the government. But they only want us during the elections. If they come around looking for support in another election I will use the broomstick on them.”

Saman and other young boys tell the WWS: “We don’t have proper jobs. We went fishing, but now our boat is destroyed. Even if we had a boat we couldn’t go fishing now because the sea is too rough. The politicians don’t care about us. Look: we are six boys, but not one of us has a job.” Saman goes on: “I blame the government. They didn’t warn us. Why don’t they like the poor people?”

About 600 people are staying at the Gunawardhanaramaya Buddhist temple in Moratuwa. The men are outside, while inside

are the mothers and children. An old mother and housemaid, Leela says: “We get food and medicine from the temple. But we can’t continue to do this every day. We want a place to live.”

Doctor Corey, who volunteers to take care of people in the temple, describes the condition of the people inside. “Many have wounds. There are no serious problems, but the old people and the children need medical care.”

There are 246 people from 37 families staying at St Peters Church. They insist that they need shelter and jobs.

About 300 people are at the Wattala St Ann’s church, where they fled for their lives. They come from the Lansiyawatta village at Wattala, which is about 10 kilometres from Colombo. They are among thousands of victims in the area. They tell us that they experienced the first wave at about 10.30 in the morning. They knew nothing in advance and had to react immediately. Two boys attending a deaf and dumb school run by the church were carried away by the current and killed.

These people are also very poor, earning their living doing odd jobs. They live in thatched houses, which simply washed away.

Ranjan’s house was nestled between the Kalaniya River delta and the sea, among other small houses. “I was watching the cricket on TV. Suddenly water began to flow into the house. We all started running away, while the water was running behind us,” he says.

“I work at a plastic company in Seeduwa. Since yesterday we have been staying in this church. The church feeds us, but we have received nothing from the government authorities. Although the radio and television have been announcing various relief programs, we haven’t received anything,” he states scornfully.

“On Sunday evening, I went back to our area, but only the corner pillars of the house were there. There was a thick layer of mud everywhere. Under these conditions, it is better if we can go somewhere else. But I have no faith in the government on these matters.

“Once again they [the government authorities] issued no warning. Even with such developments in science, look at what happens. The ruling people know nothing, they do nothing. The rulers don’t do anything for the poor. They have all the knowledge and education in their hands. Although the poor people have rights, they are not treated well. It is like Ethiopia in Africa, where people die without food. The rulers only rule for their own good. In this country the crime rate is very high. In the parliament they clash over who has the power, without thinking about the people. All these things have contributed to the disaster.”

The general feeling is that, while people are still mourning for their loved ones, they want something done soon. They feel angry and betrayed. But Welfare Minister Jayasena declared in a discussion forum on the private TV channel, Swarnavahini, on Tuesday night that completing rehabilitation work for those affected by the tsunami would take two years.



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