

Tsunami survivors in Sri Lanka's east speak to the WSWs

M. Aravindan, Sarath Kumara
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From December 29 to January 1, a WSWs team spoke with tsunami survivors in and around the eastern Sri Lankan town of Ampara. At least 25,000 people from the area were killed and more than 166,000 were left homeless by the December 26 tragedy. Another 80,000 are now living in refugee camps.

In every camp we visited, the story is similar: government apathy, bureaucratic negligence, appalling conditions and especially severe sanitation problems. At the same time, the sense of solidarity among communities of different ethnic and religious groups was unprecedented. There was widespread appreciation among Tamil and Muslim tsunami victims for the support and assistance given by ordinary Sinhala people. The response to the tsunami tragedy undermined the divisions between Sinhalese and Tamil working people that the ruling elites have consciously fostered during the country's protracted long civil war.

We arrived at the refugee camp at Sadhdhatissa Vidyalaya, in Ampara proper, at 9:30 a.m. on December 29. There were more than 1,300 refugees in the camp from villages such as Kalmunai, Pandiriuppu, Karaitivu, Nindavur and Pariya Nilavanai. Young volunteers from organisations in the area were preparing breakfast. Some 250 refugees were boarding buses to go back to their villages to see what remained of their homes.

Sanitation was a glaring problem. There were only two toilets and both were in a bad condition. This was a common state at every camp. In some places, pits had been dug, but they rapidly filled with water during heavy rain. Refugees told us that the authorities had dismissed their complaints. While the refugees had received food and clothes, sleeping mats and bedding were in short supply. Shelter was also a problem, with large numbers of people crammed into the small classrooms of a school.

Throughout the day, we spoke with tsunami victims. An 18-year-old Hindu religious schoolteacher, G. Punithawathi, from Karaitivu, recounted with gratitude the assistance received from nearby Sinhalese and Muslim communities. "Because of the ceasefire, we got support from them. If the war was still on, the situation would have been worse. In this camp, Sinhalese people brought us clothes, food, water, mosquito coils and other things," she said.

Punithawathi worked for Sarvodaya (a social work organisation) before the disaster, in the town of Matharai. "I was there for one week and was able to speak with a lot of Sinhalese people. There were misunderstandings that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were devils and that all Tamils belonged to the LTTE. Through talking, we came to understand each other better."

She outlined the difficult situation facing her family and village after the tsunami. "My father is a retired employee of the Education Department and only receives a 5,000-rupee monthly pension [approximately \$US50]. I am only a volunteer teacher and do not get paid. On December 28, my father and I went to see our house. It was destroyed. There were still dead bodies nearby.

"I am afraid to go and live there and I don't think that the government

will support us. They may give 10,000 or 15,000 rupees. What can you do with that? We supported the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) in the last election. I didn't have the vote, but my parents voted for them. But they haven't even visited us. Even before this disaster we were affected by flooding. Not a single government official visited us to give any official relief."

The floods prior to the tsunami had a devastating effect, destroying 2,000 houses and displacing 16,000 families. V. Maheswaran, a building worker from Kalmunai, was among those affected: "We were living at my relation's house close to the sea when the tsunami hit, because the floods had forced us from our home. From October to December, my house was flooded three times. You are the first people who came and asked about our conditions. When we were suffering from the floods, no relief funds were given. I don't have a proper job. My daily wage is just 300 rupees and on some days I don't get any work."

A young girl in the camp explained: "Everything was destroyed by the tsunami. A group of volunteers put me into a truck to take me to Ampara. I was afraid, because it is a Sinhalese town. My family was not with me. I was thinking, who will defend me in the hostile environment. I was afraid. I thought that all the Sinhalese were bad but I was wrong.

"When I reached Ampara, my whole idea about Sinhalese people changed. They helped us. They provided food and clothes. They were even cooking meals for us, without getting anything in return. On the way we had to pass through Muslim areas. Previously I thought that they were also against Tamils but I now understand that this isn't so. Even though these people were also affected by the tsunami, they helped us. I thank them."

Sivakumar, a mechanic for the government-owned Central Transport Board, was among the thousands of people who lost most of their family to the tsunami: "I work at the Kalmunai depot. I had four children. Now, three of my children and my wife are dead. My wife had difficulty walking because of a leg problem and was using an auto-trishaw (a small vehicle with three wheels). It was washed away. My house was completely destroyed. Only my eldest daughter survived. She escaped with the help of neighbours."

Sivakumar blamed government officials: "There was no early warning. Higher authorities and meteorological officials allowed this disaster to happen. If they acted quickly, more lives could have been saved."

Like many parts of Sri Lanka's east, Kalmunai was divided into Tamil and Muslim areas. Following the tsunami, people from both communities came together. "Normally Tamils voted for Tamil politicians and Muslim people voted for Muslim politicians," Sivakumar explained. "But no politician has come to see us here. Only the Sinhalese have come to work with Tamil and Muslim people, and we all help each other."

The WSWs team also visited a refugee camp in the predominantly Muslim area of Samanthurai, where communal tensions with neighbouring Tamils were whipped up last year. The camp accommodated displaced families from both communities, providing meals and

emergency housing since the tsunami struck. Tamil and Muslim politicians have used chauvinism in the past period to muster support but the tragedy has cut across racial and religious differences.

Abdul Halam, a volunteer working at the main relief centre in Marathamunai, told us: "We made an appeal to the comparatively unaffected villages to come and help us. Youngsters have been coming in huge numbers. On December 28, we had around 2,000 volunteers and today, we have more than 1,000. The volunteers are doing everything: recovering bodies, cleaning, helping refugees and so on. Because the main road is blocked they have to use other ways to get here. But they have come. We came to know that some refugee camps in Tamil areas were getting less aid. Therefore, today we sent some of our relief supplies to them."

Most people in the area are fishermen, day labourers, and agricultural workers. The average monthly income is just 5,000 rupees. Nine refugee camps have been set up. Water has to be supplied from outside because two-thirds of the wells are contaminated.

We spoke to survivors at Akbar village near Marathamunai, which was devastated by the tsunami. Of the 6,000 people who lived in the village and surrounding area, at least 2,500 died. According to one survivor, 43 members of one extended family were killed. Some survivors were still in shock and were unable to speak.

Mohamad Samir, a student from Alma Central College, recounted: "My family survived, but we lost all our property. I was in the house when the tsunami happened. There was no warning. I ran to the upper floor of the school. Those who could run, escaped. Women, elderly, small children and people who fell all perished. For two days we suffered without food. Yesterday, December 28, we got enough food for the first time.

"The government didn't help. Political parties didn't help. Only ordinary people have helped us. All my books were destroyed. After this tragedy, I do not feel able to continue my studies. The school has been damaged. Our English teacher was killed. Our Ahamad Sarvudeen School has been destroyed."

Mohammad Ahasan, who graduated from Rajarata University in 1999, told us: "I couldn't find a job after finishing my university studies. I was attending a graduate training program paid for by the government. I received 6,000 rupees to live on. Before that I did some small jobs.

"My father is a retired teacher. We are afraid to stay here. We are planning to leave this place but we are not sure where to go. We are surviving with the help of relatives and friends. How long will they be able to continue to help? It will take 25 years to just get back to the way we were living. I was involving in recovering and burying the bodies of the dead. Now, a rash has developed on my hands."

Katar Nufiaz, 29, lost everything in the tsunami. "I was in Qatar for three years as a driver. From the earnings, I started a gold jewelry shop but the shop has now been destroyed. The shop was the front part of my house and all my household belongings are also gone. I am thinking of going abroad again. I don't want to stay here."

Mohammed Ali, a 50-year-old security guard, also lost his house. "My wife and I worked in Saudi Arabia for 10 years and I built this house with what we earned. Now everything is gone. We found three dead bodies inside the destroyed house. There were 15 bodies outside. I lost 23 relatives.

"How can I build another house? I am too old to start again. I am living with relatives. My two daughters also lost their homes and are afraid to keep living here. I work in Colombo and I have to go to work again, but I can't leave my wife and family here. They are afraid to stay alone."

Many of the refugees were angry with the political establishment. Abdul Hakim, a 36-year-old teacher, lived near the coast at Akbar village. It took him six years to build his home. Now everything has been lost and 16 of his relatives have been killed. "We are expecting government help but at the moment nothing has been promised," he said.

Another survivor said: "The [opposition] United National Party and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) have not done anything. Rauf Hakeem and Fariar Ashraff [SLMC leaders] have visited, but they did not promise we would get help. Every family here has been affected. Most of our children have died. Economic activity has broken down. We want the government to help us to carry on with our lives."

On December 31, we travelled to the Periya Kallaru area, in the Batticaloa district where many government employees live. Others make a living from carpentry, masonry, fishing and odd jobs. The tsunami severed the roads from both directions. The survivors were trapped by the sea on one side and a lagoon on the other. No relief reached the area for four days and people were starving. The area hospital was completely destroyed by the wave.

After we introduced ourselves as WWSW journalists, people gathered around. Old men and women, students and unemployed youth—about 20 in all—wanted to speak about their problems and experiences.

Sumathi, a young housewife, recounted: "My house was near the sea. I saw the waves coming. I ran to the other houses and warned them so they were able to escape. Most people are day labourers and most of the damaged houses belong to them."

Describing her family's plight, she said: "Our house was completely destroyed. Nothing is left of our household goods. A mason gets 500 rupees a day, while a labourer might only get 300. The fishermen sometimes don't get any catch. I have passed the university entrance exam, but I cannot find a job. My husband doesn't have any permanent employment. He is also just a day labourer. Normally he earns 200 rupees per day, but he doesn't get work regularly.

"Sinhalese people have helped us a lot. From today, a committee has been formed to distribute relief. All the received items are stored in one place and distributed. Every family is given a number. The committee calls the number and gives out the goods."

Sundaralingam, a driver in Batticaloa, explained: "The LTTE and the Special Task Force (police commandos) have helped but ordinary Sinhala people came from far away just to help us. We will never forget it. Due to transport problems, food didn't reach us for the first two or three days. We were starving."

Lakshan, a 12-year-old student at Kallaru Central Collage, said: "My school was also damaged. Sinhalese people came and helped us. We thank them. We don't want ethnic, religious and language divisions. We don't want the war. We don't want any separate [Tamil] state. We want to live with Sinhalese. After the road was repaired, the first people who came to bring relief were Sinhalese."

Sundaralingam expressed the hope that the tsunami would end the fighting between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government for good. "During the war, we lived with fear. Since the cease-fire [in 2001], we were living better. This is an opportunity for peace now. God has united everybody by this disaster."

Another survivor said, "Everybody has joined together and worked together. The Sinhalese people cried when they saw what happened to us. We must not have ethnic, caste or religious differences anymore. In the same way, the government must not differentiate people."

Thusarsini, a final year arts student at the Peradeniya University [in Kandy], listed what people want: "First, the government must repair the road. Our hospital is damaged. We have to go to other hospitals if it is necessary. How can we do that without a road? I was at the campus when the tsunami happened and returned yesterday. There were no buses so I had to walk. We have lost a lot. We don't want war. If war breaks out again we will be finished. We all must unite. Sinhalese people have been helping us."

Sundaralingam added: "The government must repair the road immediately. That should be the first thing. People are afraid to rebuild their houses near the sea so the government has to provide suitable places

away from the coast. It will take us many years to rebuild without help so the government should help build new houses.”

Before returning to Colombo, we also spoke to young survivors at the Bandaranayake School on January 1. Like the Tamil refugees elsewhere, they expressed gratitude and respect for the assistance given by Sinhalese workers and villagers. “We have learnt a lot from this disaster,” said Siyani, a young female student. “The government didn’t do anything. Only the Sinhalese people supported us.”

Another youth, Piravy, agreed: “Sinhalese, Muslims and Tamils must unite together. The LTTE is also helping people, but we don’t want a separate Tamil Eelam state.” A young girl added: “We don’t want a Tamil Eelam. We must live united with the Sinhala and Muslim people.”



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