

South Indian fishing villages devastated by tsunami

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Cuddalore, a coastal district 175 kilometres south of Madras, the Tamil Nadu state capital, was one of the areas worst affected when the tsunami hit India's east coast on December 26. According to official reports, 51 villages were seriously damaged, 15,000 dwellings wiped out and 615 killed in the already poverty-stricken district. Another 214 were injured and an estimated 99,700 people have been displaced by the disaster.

District Collector Bedi, the top local administrative officer, told the *World Socialist Web Site* on January 5 that 24,204 people had been accommodated in 38 relief camps. He explained that 610 hectares of farmland were inundated with saline water, rendering it unfit for cultivation, and that 5,500 wooden and fibre-reinforced catamarans, 547 motorboats and 5,539 fishing nets had been damaged.

We visited Devanapattinam, a fishing village of 3,000 people three kilometres from Cuddalore, the district capital. Every aspect of village life has been devastated. Huts and personal belongings were swept away. Many villagers lost their children and some children lost their parents. Brothers and sisters and even entire families have been killed or are still missing. Many of the survivors are now in shock with no idea how to resume a normal life.

Rajshanmugam Manjikuppan, 40, saw the first wave coming at about 8.30 a.m. on December 26. When the wave threw him to the top of a coconut tree he managed to save himself by desperately clinging onto a coconut branch. He was later taken to the local hospital. "I still have back pain. A total of 90 people died in this village," he told us.

Anusuya Krishna Moorthy used to earn a living by selling fresh cow milk to local villagers. Although she managed to save her 10 cows, she lost all her

customers.

"My house is one kilometre from the seashore," she explained. "After the wave came I was able to move the cows to my daughter's house in Panrutti, 24 kms from Cuddalore but had to spend 2,000 rupees doing it."

Moorthy has two sons. The eldest, Velmurugan, 32, worked as a bulldozer and tractor driver at the state agricultural department. The job cost her 40,000 rupees to get for him. But Velmurugan is now out of work, after the state government imposed severe economic restructuring policies and job cuts.

"Now both of my two sons are unemployed," she said. "So it is very difficult to live."

Ezhumala Krishnan lived 70 metres from the seashore. A few minutes before the first wave hit he was helping his 16-year-old daughter with the cooking. His wife was out selling fish, his youngest son, Jeyeses Kumar, 12, was at the beach with his friends, and his other son was playing cricket near the college, 750 metres away from the sea.

"Suddenly a big wave entered our house and my daughter screamed. I pulled her hand and we rushed upstairs in our house. She was crying, worried about the safety of her brothers. It wasn't until the next morning that we found out that my younger son had died and his body was trapped in bushes. We were able reunite on Monday but spent an hour retrieving my son's dead body.

"Although the state government has offered 100,000 rupees [\$US2,300] relief aid to every family who lost members I was denied this amount because my son's name was not on the official list. When I asked the local government authorities why, they said it was a mistake caused by the misspelling of his name!

"We lost our catamaran and fishing nets, as well as

our jewelry, television and money but it will take a long time to get back to normal lives. Although some private organisations have distributed food, rice, saris and mats, most of the relief materials have yet to reach the victims.”

Shanmugam Marikkannu lost his elder sister Kalai Arasi, 32, whose was due to be married this month. His house was only 200 metres from the sea.

In 1998, after 100 houses in the area were destroyed by sea erosion, the state government was forced to erect stone walls along the shore to prevent any further damage. But this was only sanctioned for a quarter of the most vulnerable areas. Although local residents demanded that the walls be extended, the government scheme was eventually abandoned.

“If they’d properly built up and extended the wall a lot of the damage caused by the tsunami could have been lessened,” Marikkannu said.

WSWS reporters also visited Singarathoppu, a village of nearly 3,000 situated about 5 km from Cuddalore. Murugan Shivaraj, the young father of a two-year-old girl, managed to save his daughter but lost his wife when the tsunami dragged her into nearby riverside bushes.

“My aunt Ehammal was also killed at the same time. She was visiting our place but we couldn’t save her life,” he said.

“The state government gave [her family] 100,000 rupees compensation,” he continued, “but because of this we are not receiving 4,000 rupees and 60 kilos of rice allocated [for each affected family]. We lost our house and I am the only earner in the family. I worked as a fisherman for 100 rupees per day.”

Akilan Kuttiyandi, a volunteer for Nehru Yuvakendra (youth centre), which is sponsored by UNICEF, described his work counselling tsunami survivors, particularly women and children in shock from the catastrophe.

“When the tsunami hit, three-year-old Subina witnessed her brother die in the hands of her mother. She had not spoken properly to anyone for the past 10 days. After our counselling today she has started to speak and play as usual.”

Alamelu Pachayappan, Subina’s aunt, explained her experiences: “When I first heard the sound of the wave, I thought it was some sort of riot, like one that had previously occurred in the village, but no one knew

what was happening. I saw a black-coloured dirty wave. It hit me and within moments I was pushed to the nearest bridge. Most of the people in our village survived because they escaped to this bridge, which is about 500 metres from our house.”

Pachayappan told WSWS correspondents that she was unable to eat normally “because the incident again and again keeps coming into my mind”.

A series of bureaucratic delays by the Tamil Nadu state government is now worsening the already catastrophic situation facing tsunami survivors in the district.

Those who lost their houses, clothes and other basic items have responded to the government inaction by refusing to clear the debris. They fear that if they did, it would be used to deny them compensation as the authorities would claim a “lack of evidence” of damage.

“We are not clearing the nets because the officials have to provide relief,” one fisherman said. “They won’t believe that my house is damaged if I start fixing it,” said another fisherman.

Two weeks after the devastation, villagers are still reluctant to move damaged boats flung far inland by the tsunami. In order to press their demands, villagers have organised a series of street blockades. Non-governmental agencies involved in rehabilitation work have also reported that some villagers have refused to move into temporary shelters, fearing that they will never be provided with permanent housing.



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