

Sri Lanka: the day the tsunami devastated Hambantota

A correspondent
17 January 2005

The following article is an eyewitness account from a resident of Hambantota, the south coast Sri Lankan town that was severely damaged by the December 26 tsunami. Located about 240 kilometres from Colombo, the district is one of Sri Lanka's poorest. The writer describes the destruction and loss of life, the lack of government assistance and the difficulties now confronting local residents.

It was a sunny morning at about 9.00-9.15 on December 26, when suddenly, the air was filled with the crazy sound of car horns, rushing vehicles and screaming, running people.

I was stunned at first, not having experienced this sort of situation ever before. Those fleeing told me that a huge tidal wave had hit the Hambantota town area and it was wiping out lives and properties. Our house was at an elevation of about 12 metres, so the waves did not strike there.

Most people were worried and distraught about family members who had gone to the Sunday market to buy their weekly vegetables, rice and other commodities. The market was located about two metres above Mean Sea Level (MSL), near the mouth of the Karagan Levaya lagoon. It had been moved there in 2000.

At around 9.45 a.m., the radio reported that an earthquake had occurred off the coast of Sumatra, Indonesia and that a series of massive tidal waves had hit the Matara and Galle areas. I understood it to be a tsunami and tried to contact other towns but electricity and telephone communication had collapsed everywhere.

I walked to a higher point in order to see the devastated area. It was a catastrophe of unimaginable magnitude. Around the edge of the lagoon had been hundreds of tiny huts. But after the tsunami hit, almost

everything had been washed into Karagan Levaya. Residents and houses up to eight metres above sea level no longer existed. When I walked closer to the damaged area, there were dead bodies scattered all over the ground.

In this poor rural area, people from neighbouring villages such as Bandagiriya, Gonnoruwa, Katuwana, Suriyawewa and Ridiyagama would come to the Sunday market to sell vegetables and earn a living. All of this was wiped out.

With bicycles, motorbikes, three-wheel taxis and even big lorries and buses full of passengers quickly carried away by the tsunami, what must have happened to the people? Many bodies would have been submerged in Karagan Levaya. Lots of people were gathered there, shocked and saddened, to survey the disaster. Their faces were full of fear and anxiety.

All the roads were impassable and there was no access to the centre of the damaged area. It is difficult to express my ideas in words. But shouldn't there have been some way of finding survivors of this devastation?

Most of those affected in Hambantota were municipal council workers, salt industry employees, fishermen, small-scale traders and the rural poor. Local professionals such as doctors, engineers, lawyers and their families were also missing.

The average house in the area was between 30 and 50 square metres, constructed from brick and with tiled roofs, but their walls were not reinforced for lateral force. With the exception of reinforced concrete structures, all the houses and buildings within an area of approximately 100 hectares were wrecked.

People able to cling to a tree or climb up to the first floor of two-storey building were able to survive with minor injuries. Trees growing firmly in the ground were not uprooted but the houses were not so strong. At

about 10 a.m., even though the situation was improving, there were still abnormal, muddied, rough waves at sea.

I heard that only about 50 of the 250 local and foreign tourist vehicles that went to Yala—the jungle game sanctuary a few kilometres from Hambantota—had returned from the area. Many of those visiting the sanctuary must have perished.

All of the equipment and property of fishermen from Hambantota port was destroyed and many damaged boats could be seen thrown up on land. A few days after the disaster, I met some fishermen who were at sea on December 26. When they saw the tidal waves hitting the beaches they sped out into deep waters and were able to survive without any damage.

Fearful of more tidal waves, all of the shops were closed down, even in the non-affected areas of the southern coastal belt. Many people had left Hambantota by noon, travelling mainly to Suriyawewa and Okeywela, villages 25 kilometres away.

There are many beautiful, naturally-formed sand dunes—15 to 20 metres high and 35 to 50 metres wide—in the Hambantota coastal area. These dunes protected most of the lowland areas from the tidal waves but in places where there were no dunes, especially at the sea entrance of Karagan Levaya, the waves hit with maximum force and caused unprecedented levels of damage.

Twenty-four hours after the incident, government still had not taken any action to remove the bodies from Karagan Levaya and other affected areas on land. If there had been any warning, even 20 minutes before the disaster, most people in Hambantota and other coastal areas could have been saved. A common feature of Sri Lanka's coastal areas is that there are safe places at least 20 metres above sea level within 100 metres of the shore.

When I was at university I read several articles by the late Sri Lankan geologist, P.W. Withanage, who blamed authorities for not constructing houses and buildings capable of withstanding earthquakes and other shocks. The Sri Lankan ruling elite, however, does not possess this sort of vision and had not even established a basic early warning system.

Due to their poverty, most Sri Lankan fishermen have to live right next to the sea. They go fishing at night and have to sleep nearby during the day. They also

have to protect their fishing gear, which is on the beach. These fishermen hire their vessels from a boat owner and have to give him the major share of their catch.

I visited the hospital on the afternoon of the catastrophe. It was quickly filling with the drowned and the injured. Hospital staff worked at fever pitch but they took great care of the survivors.

It was 72 hours after the tsunami hit before army personnel were sent to collect bodies in the lagoon and surrounding area. Over two days, 1,629 corpses, some decomposing, were collected but many more deaths have occurred in this area.

Government authorities have now organised people to use heavy machinery to clean the wreckage of the houses and other properties. But this work is being conducted without the survivors being informed. It has also been announced that in future the government will not allow anything to be built within 100 metres of the coastal vegetation boundary.

An increase in tourism over the past decade, and the odd jobs connected to this industry, has seen thousands of people without land or employment flock to coastal areas. Others have work in the fishing industry. These occupations are seen as relatively advantageous compared to farming. Together with the huge tourist resorts, hundreds of small tourist hotels and shops selling souvenirs and ornamental goods have developed along the coast. These businesses provided a livelihood for many families and the education of their children. All this has now been shattered.

Where are ordinary people supposed to get the materials or the money to rebuild their houses close to their employment or other places where they can earn a living? The authorities have announced they will provide affected families with 600,000 rupees (about \$US600) for a house. Last year, when terrible floods hit the area, the government also declared that all those affected would be provided with housing in safe places. All they were given were paltry sums, forcing them to build in same risky areas.



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