

Tsunami survivors in southern India speak to the WSWs

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Ten days after tidal waves hit south India on December 26, corpses were still being recovered from the sand and wreckage in Nagapattinam district when *World Socialist Web Site* reporters visited the area on January 6.

Eight thousand people in the district were killed by the tsunami, most of them from poor fishing families, 73 villages were damaged, 36,860 houses smashed and 196,184 people seriously affected. The tidal waves also destroyed around 10,200 fishing vessels and damaged another 893 boats. Over 10,500 families are now living in temporary accommodation in the Seruthur, Poompuhar and Nagapattinam areas.

According to official figures released on January 20, India's tsunami death toll has risen to 16,413 with the number of confirmed deaths at 10,744 and 5,669 people reported missing, presumed dead. India's home ministry has estimated total damage from the tsunami to be \$1.6 billion.

In Nagapattinam many of those who had lost loved ones are in a state of despair, their desperate plight compounded by the slow-moving response of state and federal government authorities to the disaster.

Ragu Chellakunchu, 18, lost a number of his close relatives, including four young children of his great uncle. "About 4,000 to 5,000 people, including traders from the neighbouring state of Kerala, come to Keechankuppam fish market every Sunday. At least 4,000 people would have been killed when the waves hit," he explained.

"The government has only distributed Rs.4,000 [\$91], 60 kilograms of rice and a white dhoti [traditional cloth worn by Indians] per family but the total lost by each family is over Rs.100,000. We could live if the government provided us with at least half that sum, but we don't believe that it is going to give us the required compensation."

Mariyappan, 40, a fisherman for 30 years, was critical of the government's attitude towards the tsunami survivors. "We had more help from ordinary people and there was no assistance. There was no government authorities for 10 days," he said.

"In Keechankuppam we've buried about 1,500 people and have been discovering corpses on a daily basis," he continued. "The situation is so bad that we will not be able to go fishing for at least two to three months. How are we going to survive during this time?"

In Akkaraipettai we spoke to 27-year-old Rajini Kuttian, who lost his mother when the tsunami hit his village. "Sixty huts were destroyed by the waves. About 250 people lived in these dwellings so about four to five people in each family were killed. My eldest brother's wife died attempting to save her children." Pointing to a rooftop, he continued, "Those able to get up there survived."

Kuttian told the WSWs that the authorities should provided decent accommodation. He said that the Rs.100,000 promised by the government for the next of kin had "not materialised". "Private and voluntary organisations have done more to help the victims," he added.

Kumar Narayanan, 30, said: "Everything in our house, from the computer to the television and fridge, has been washed away," he said. "My younger brother was studying for B. Tech. and lost all his books."

Narayanan accused government officials of hijacking some of the relief supplies: "Officials take up to half the things that have been donated by the voluntary organisations," he said. "There are some elements who stop the relief during transport and so it doesn't reach the survivors."

Murali Dhakshina Moorthy, 28, pointed to huge losses now facing fishermen whose vessels had been destroyed: "An ordinary catamaran and net costs Rs.150,000, a boat approximately Rs.250,000, and a motorboat about Rs.1.5 million. What kind of assistance is the government going to provide us for these losses?"

Moorthy was also angry because these losses could have been avoided if the government had issued a timely warning. He said that fishermen should be provided with weather reports and tsunami warnings on a daily basis. "We already had problems harvesting enough fish but now we are in a desperate situation like the peasants that some time back had to eat tat curry."

Patma Vettri, a 32-year-old mother of five children, said: "My youngest son was studying for his first standard and told me that as he was doing well and would be made the class leader. I'd just begun cleaning the house when all of a sudden the tsunami hit and took him away. My other four children are very upset over his death and did not eat properly for several days."

Vettri explained that her husband did not have a permanent

job. Although able to secure occasional employment fishing, he was only paid about Rs.500 for three days work.

Pukazhenth, 52, a hairdresser told WWSW reporters that the tsunami survivors “received more help” from the voluntary organisations and individuals, who properly distributed the aid, regardless of caste and religion. “But the government has tried to stop them doing this. They were told that all assistance had to go through government channels,” she said.

New Delhi turned down offers of international aid, saying it could cope with the disaster itself. There is growing evidence, however, that many survivors are not receiving enough aid. The Hong-Kong based Asian Human Rights Commission issued a statement on January 10 declaring it was “extremely concerned about the pathetic state of relief operations being carried out in India.” It pointed to the lack of coordination, aid mismanagement, caste discrimination in the distribution of supplies and the “meagre” quantities of relief.

What the WWSW team saw supports these criticisms. Government officials claim that the number of tsunami refugee centres in Nagapattinam district has been reduced from a peak of 82, accommodating 86,000, to 40 with 36,000 people. But this decline is not because the government is providing safe and adequate housing.

Fisherman’s wife Bhagya Lakshmi, who was sheltering in a Nagapattinam wedding hall said: “Over the last two weeks we have been moved from a temple to a school and then to a wedding hall. Now they say we have to move again because they want to conduct marriages here.” While trying to calm her wailing baby, she added: “I don’t know how I’ll manage this little one and another son in this way.”

It is not clear how long the affected families will be forced to live in temporary accommodation. According to government officials, about 12,000 sheds were being erected at 38 different locations in the district. The government will build more than half of these structures—6,524 units—with the rest provided by Non Government Organisations and other private bodies.

In contrast to the government indifference, sympathy and support from ordinary people has been overwhelming. Residents from a village near Bangalore, the Karnataka state capital, collected money and a truckload of relief items to be distributed among Nagapattinam survivors.

WWSW correspondents spoke to B. Shetti, a volunteer from that group. The 28-year-old cable operator said: “I don’t believe most of what the government claims to be doing, but the private organisations are helping a lot. We banded together and collected relief to help those affected and came straight here to see the situation firsthand and make sure that the survivors were given this assistance.”

The WWSW team travelled 10 km from Nagapattinam to Velankanni, which is another coastal town and regarded as a holy city by Christians. Velankanni’s death toll has reached 2,000 with 1,000 missing. As well as fishing families, pilgrims to the Velankanni church and small shopkeepers near the

church were killed when the tsunami hit.

Pathima Veerappan, 37, ran toy and bangle stalls along the Velankanni seashore. She lost all her property—shops and houses. “My husband and I were preparing fried fish for the tourists that day. Suddenly the wave came and we tried to hang onto each other, but couldn’t. I was being dragged by the wave but shouted to our servant boy Bala that I was going to die. He pulled me back. When I opened my eyes my clothes had been washed away so somebody covered me with a jute bag. I still have pains in my body because I was hit by a van being carried along by the wave.

“It was the day after Christmas so if you take into account the number of tourists, the death toll will be probably be about 6,000. But the Father [of the church] and the authorities are minimising the figures in order to stop any panic that might affect the number of tourist visits to the area.”

Devayani Swakkanraj, 30, a domestic worker earning Rs.400 a month, was devastated by the tsunami. Her husband works in a local hotel. “Our native place is Vizhupuram but we have been living here for the last 20 years. We had a rented house but it has now been destroyed and we have nowhere to stay. We’ve received food from private voluntary organisations but cannot afford to even purchase a mat or a pot.”

Government sanitary workers from Tiruchchirappalli, a major city hundreds of kilometres inland, came to Velankanni to help clean up the area.

Team supervisor Balu, 35, told WWSW reporters: “We are digging up dead bodies every day in this area. This morning, even after nine days, we found two more corpses and buried them. The smell from the heaps of rubbish and wreckage is terrible.

“Many of the corpses,” he continued, “are not taken to be counted because the police have instructed us to bury them as soon as they are found. The actual death toll, therefore, must be much higher than the government statistics.”



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