

People of war-ravaged Jaffna hit hard by tsunami

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The tsunami that shattered the coastal regions of Sri Lanka played havoc in the northern parts of the Jaffna peninsula. According to statistics from the country's Disaster Management Centre, 2,640 people were killed, with another 540 missing, while 541 were injured. Nearly 50,000 displaced people have been accommodated in 32 camps in the peninsula. Another 150,000 are reportedly sheltering in the homes of relatives and friends.

The tidal wave destroyed a coastal belt about 18 km wide in Vadamarachchi (the northern Jaffna peninsula), including Velvettithurai and Point Pedro, about 420 km from Colombo, a region already devastated by the country's 20-year civil war. Throughout the area, hundreds of small farming villages depend on fishing for daily subsistence. During the war, villagers went through immense hardships, as they had to flee the fighting several times and resettle years later. They also faced fishing bans imposed by the Sri Lankan navy as part of the war measures, and still have to obtain passes to go to sea.

Now Vadamarachchi, which is the northernmost tip of the island, has been declared a "high security zone" by the military forces, with access restricted to the public. Checkpoints have been erected almost every 100 metres. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) control a smaller part of Vadamarachchi East.

Thousands of people in 20 coastal villages such as Manatkadu, Marudhankeni, Munai, Supermadam, Nagarkovil, Polikandy were washed away to sea. WSWs correspondents visited the worst-affected village, Manatkadu, on December 28. Survivors described how the towering water pushed about 1.5 km inland, taking at least 100 lives, almost one-tenth of the village population. Almost three-quarters of the village's thatched houses were destroyed.

Kurugulasingham, principal of the Manatkadu village school, which was washed away, said at least 50 school children lost their lives. "If it was a school day most of us with more children would have been washed away. Lots of people are still missing. The government is yet to give us any help," he added.

A day after the tragedy, 100 bodies were brought to the Mandhikai hospital. Nearly 532 families were sheltered at the hospital and later shifted to other camps. Most of the villagers are now housed at the Vadamarachchi Hindu Ladies College.

WSWS correspondents visited the refugee camp where Munai villagers have been sheltered. Kumaraguru, the camp's government village officer, said: "These people are devastated by the tragedy. But the government has not yet sent us aid. Only the people around the area help them.

"There are 256 families here. We do not know how long we can provide them with food and health facilities. We may have to spend tens of millions of rupees to resettle them. They don't have houses because Marudhankeni and Manatkadu villages were demolished completely.

"Here we only have spaces to keep 100 families but we have more than 250. We informed the divisional secretary of the situation, but the government is still silent. About 750 people are sheltered here, yet we have only four toilets. We have made four temporary pits to use as toilets. That is why we cannot maintain the health facilities."

Land mines were another danger, he explained. The military planted mines that were swept away by the tsunami waves and scattered in other areas. Similar dangers exist in parts of eastern Sri Lanka.

The WSWs visited several other villages affected by the tsunami, including Munai and Supermadam.

Several people were dead and all the fishing gear, including boats and nets, was destroyed in these villages.

Fishing families, dependent on local donors for survival, were not sure whether they would receive assistance from government or the LTTE. Although some people expressed confidence that the LTTE might help them re-build their livelihood, others voiced desperate concerns for their future. One fisherman from Supermadam said: “It would take at least 10 years for us to rebuild ourselves. We can’t say how long these people will assist us.” Another woman asked: “How many days will these people give rice to us?”

S. Indhiringam, from Supermadam, who was sheltering at the North Hindu Ladies College, said: “We don’t believe that someone will help us rebuild our lives, because no one gave compensation for what we lost in the war. Now this tragedy has happened throughout the island. Fishermen are the most affected. During the war the authorities banned fishing and this time we are also the people who face disaster.”

A woman who had recently resettled after 15 years living as a refugee in India said: “Just four months ago we returned through Mannar (a northern district coastal town) by boat. No one has helped us yet. My house was near the beach. The wave rolled my child and me over again and again. We saved our lives with the help of god. I lost everything.”

Pushpamalar, a widowed mother of three children, expressed her fear about their future. “I am a widow. I earned 50 or 100 rupees [US 50 or 100 cents] a day from fishing workers by helping them select fish. Now how can I live? The government hasn’t given any help till now. I have no confidence that it will help. How many days can these people (local volunteers) tend us by collecting from the masses? There is nothing apart from death for us.”

Louise Mary from Manatkadu lost her 10-month-old infant and was admitted to Mandhikai hospital. She described the tragedy with tears: “When I saw the waves, I started to run with my children. Even though the wave caught me, I didn’t leave my children. When I was startled by seeing a Palmyra tree (palm tree) falling down, I lost my baby.”

T. Indirani said her family had lost its boat, nets and everything, including her house. She was desperate to save her children. “We rebuilt the jobs we lost in the

war by bowing to this man and that man. What shall we do now?” she asked. Suganthi, a mother of three, added: “We bought the boat and nets by taking a loan from the bank. Now how can we repay the loan? We can only repay if we have jobs.”

Gopalasingham, a middle-aged fisherman from Supermadam, said: “We don’t believe anyone will help us to build our lives. My fishing gear was destroyed in 1989 after the war broke out between the LTTE and the Indian Peace Keeping Force [the Indian military intervened in northern and eastern Sri Lanka under the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord]. Then all my fishing gear was destroyed again during the 1995 Riviresa military operation of the Peoples Alliance government.

“Despite my repeated requests, the government has not given any assistance to this day. Even the cost incurred in typing letters to the government has been in vain. So how can we believe that this time the government will come and assist us?”

WSWS correspondents did not come across any government or foreign emergency relief during our visits. Overwhelmingly it was the local people and regional organisations that had come forward to provide food and other essential items to the most needy. Ordinary people were also involved in searching for survivors or bodies in the debris.



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