

On-the-spot-report

Devastation on the east coast of Sri Lanka

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Ampara district on the southeastern coast of Sri Lanka was directly in the path of the December 26 tsunami and was the first to be hit. Massive waves swept over the low-lying coast without warning, flattening buildings and sweeping people away. It was a fresh calamity in a district that has already been deeply scarred by 20 years of civil war.

While the government puts the death toll at 13,703, the actual figure is probably twice as high. Those we spoke to, including several divisional secretaries, estimated the number killed at nearly 25,000, with more than 2,500 still missing. It is a terrible tragedy: out of a population of 512,000, nearly 5 percent or 1 in 20 are dead.

Many more people have been left homeless without food, clean water and medical care. In Ampara district alone, there are nearly 100 refugee camps housing over 80,000 people. At least 166,000 of the 226,440 those living in the district's coastal areas have been affected by the disaster—in other words, three in every four people.

In the wake of the tsunami, the east coast has also been hit by monsoonal flooding, cutting roads and leaving thousands of people stranded. The district itself is divided between areas under army control and those controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). It will take weeks to establish the extent of the destruction in the district and the number of dead.

The *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) reporting team set out from Colombo on December 28, two days after tsunami struck. All along the main Colombo-Kandy-Ampara road, we saw a continuous stream of lorries and vehicles proceeding to the north and east of the island. People were streaming from relatively unaffected areas in the west, northwest and centre of the country to help the victims.

We saw men and women, young boys and girls, equipped with shovels, spades and other tools heading east. They were going on their own initiative to help to clear away the debris, clean up the houses and to help families get back on their feet. At this point, neither the government nor the district administration was even considering rehabilitation. Along the highway, in response to an appeal announced over Sirasa TV, numerous small groups of people were collecting supplies for the victims of the disaster.

Even more remarkable was that the overwhelming majority heading east were Sinhalese going to help Tamils and Muslims. For decades, the ruling elites in Sri Lanka have whipped communal antagonisms with devastating consequences. What the crisis quickly revealed, however, is that among ordinary working people there is an elemental recognition that the problems they all face are the same, regardless of language and religion.

At Kadawatha just outside Colombo, three young girls from a Free Trade Zone were carrying a package to hand to aid convoys going east. While these workers are among the lowest paid, receiving a monthly wage of just 5,000 rupees [\$US50], they felt that they had to do something to help.

Anura Kumara, a young man from Meerigama involved in distributing aid, told us: "We never consider whether the victims are Tamils or

Muslims. There is real destitution here. It is heart rending. There is no room for nationalist pretensions. The tears and blood of all men are the same. All blood is red."

At the refugee camp in the Bandaranayake Girls School at Ampara, Rohana and Mahinda said: "An enormous multitude has suddenly been made destitute. In a period like this, there is no room to think of race or community. We are all human beings."

At Ampara

Ampara district has Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities. The worst affected were mainly Tamils and Muslims living close to the coast—many of them fishermen and their families. Large sections of the low-lying coast were washed away. For up to 100 metres from the sea, next to nothing was left. Most of the houses were flattened by waves of up to 10 metres. Locals described waves as high as the coconut trees. In some places, the water raced up to three kilometres inland.

Everywhere the scene was the same. Homes, hospitals, Hindu temples and other buildings shared the same fate. Trees were uprooted and cars, vans and buses smashed. The remains of TVs, refrigerators, bicycles, cookers and other household goods were strewn everywhere. A fishing boat had been stranded two kilometres inland and evidence of the disaster was to be seen for another two kilometres.

At Kalmunai, the damage was severe. For up to a kilometre from the sea, all buildings had been destroyed. It was like the area had been carpet-bombed.

At Karaitivu, previously densely populated, the whole area had been flattened. For first 50 metres, not even a broken wall could be seen, only debris. Half a kilometre inland, water reached the second floor of the Karaitivu Central College buildings. At the front of the school, the water had carved out a huge trench over a metre deep.

The Karaitivu hospital near the coast was also badly damaged. All 25 patients and one of the nurses were killed. The rest of the medical staff managed to survive. The hospital doctor was engulfed by the waves, but was able to cling to the branch of a tree.

Travelling along the coast road on December 29, we counted 20 refugee camps from Karaitivu to Maruthamuni. There were more away from the main road. Every school, mosque, church and temple where people could be housed had been turned into refugee camp. But in many places, there was not a government official to be seen.

Siva Kumar, a mechanic, explained: "This refugee camp is run by Sinhala people and they are looking after us very well. We still haven't received any government help. I would like to thank the Sinhala people especially. Because of the war, we had a misunderstanding. We now know that things are different. The clothes I am wearing were provided by a

Sinhalese woman who worked with me at the government-owned public transport depot.”

Entire families were wiped out on December 26. Thalif Deen, a 31-year-old cook, lost seven members of his family—his wife, mother-in-law, father-in-law and four children were dead. Only his daughter escaped. Fifty-year-old, Mohammad Ali, a security guard, said that 23 of his relatives perished.

Sanitation was a major problem. Even on December 29, many corpses could be seen. Young volunteers were busy burying or cremating them. At Samanthurai alone, some 4,000 bodies were buried on December 28.

Many of those affected were poor fisherman, who use frail boats and log rafts called theppams to eke out a living. Most fishermen have to find casual jobs when they are unable to fish. Some days they earn 200 to 500 rupees; other days they earn nothing. They had no alternative but to live in huts near the sea.

The survivors were angry that there had been no warning. With no previous experience or understanding, many people, especially children, followed the sea as it receded immediately prior to the tsunami. They and others on the shore suddenly saw the huge waves and began to run. Taken completely by surprise, the old, sick and the young simply perished.

On hearing the news of the catastrophe, people in Ampara town, 20km inland, rushed to help the survivors. Three-wheelers, buses, vans and lorries headed to the coast to assist.

Senevirathne, a young three-wheeler driver, said: “Somebody told us the sea was flooding the land. It was about 9.30 a.m. on Sunday. We rushed to the coast. When we reached the area it was completely destroyed. In my three-wheeler I transported six victims [to safety]. Everybody who had a vehicle was doing the same.”

Official inaction

By contrast, officials reacted with bureaucratic indifference and incompetence. Even after the first wave had crashed in, no action was taken.

The government agent for the district, Herath Abeyweera, told us that he came to know of the disaster around 10 a.m. Asked about his response, he declared rather defensively: “Because Sunday was a holiday and most officers were from other areas, they had gone home. We started work on Monday.”

Abeyweera explained that he had contacted the Department of Meteorology. “They confirmed that something had happened but said that the impact would not be major... There was the possibility that sea water would come inland,” he said.

Asked about the role of the Disaster Management Unit established by President Chandrika Kumaratunga, Abeyweera dismissed the question, saying the unit was meant for floods and typhoons, not crises of this kind.

Official apathy and the lack of information only heightened the sense of panic. Senevirathnem, the three-wheeler driver, told us: “When I reached Ampara, I got a call from my wife. She was afraid and there were rumors that the waves would reach Ampara as well. So I had to go and take her to a safe place further inland. Otherwise I could have transported more victims to safety.”

While we were at the Government Agent’s office, a news flash came over Shakhi TV that India faced another tsunami, which would hit the east coast in less than an hour. Everybody panicked. No one had any idea what to do. It took more than quarter of an hour to ring the Meteorological Department and confirm there was no threat. But there was no means of letting anyone know, apart from the midday news on state-run Rupavahini TV.

In the refugee camps, there was chaos. One of our contacts, Anura, told us there were 2,500 refugees at the camp at Eravur in Batticaloa district when news of another tsunami arrived. “Everybody panicked and started to run leaving everything behind, even what they were given by relief workers. They did not know where they were running. [In some cases], we don’t know where they went.”

“I saw children struggling. One three-year-old boy was stuck on a barbed-wire fence, held by his shirt and trousers. He was crying out loud. Fortunately I was able to free him.” Anura was angry that there was no information. “The village officer was there but there was no communication with the district administration. The whole incident was unnecessary.”

Most refugee camps had not received any government assistance by December 29—especially those near the Batticaloa District. Several divisional secretaries complained to us on December 30 that no money had arrived, even though the government was publicly saying that enough funds were being provided for relief. They hadn’t received a cent and were providing aid out of their own pockets.

Everywhere there were complaints about the lack of resources. One divisional secretary said that he needed at least 40 watertanks for refugee camps, but only had 5. He had just one water truck doing the rounds, trying to provide clean water to those who needed it.

Five hospitals in the Ampara district were damaged. Ampara General Hospital, the largest in the district, was overwhelmed. Hospital workers told us that staff returned to work as soon as they could and most were on duty by the evening of December 26. Many began working on the morning of the disaster and continued for three days straight.

Everyone was there—doctors, nurses, minor staff and paramedics as well as the cleaning staff from a private contractor. No one asked about additional pay. They worked voluntarily. Some had lost family members. Because of this extraordinary effort, only four of the patients died after being admitted.

A number of areas were still inaccessible. On December 31, we travelled from Ampara with a volunteer aid team from Meerigama taking a lorry load of relief supplies to Periya Kallar in the Batticaloa district. Periya Kallar was hard hit by the tsunami and left without assistance for five days. All the approach roads had been severely damaged.

The team distributed half of the provisions to a refugee camp at Periya Kallar and proceeded to the Kallar Bridge but could go no further. Volunteers had to carry supplies on foot for nearly a kilometre. As one of the team exclaimed: “This is the first time that I have carried a whole rice bag on my back.” A doctor from the Ampara hospital used a motorbike to ferry goods to the refugees.

At Kottai Kallaru we were again forced to stop. Local people saw us and waded through water across a broken causeway in order to get desperately needed supplies.

On the way back, the road was blocked by a lorry stuck in the sand. We trudged through the rain until we came across a convoy of police commandos who transported us to Karativu. They offered to take us to Ampara that night but floods blocked the road and we spent the night in their camp. The following day we made arrived back in Ampara along roads that were under water and washed away in parts.

The three days revealed all too clearly not only the abject failings of the present social and economic order, but also the latent capacities of ordinary working people to build a better one.



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