

Anger over Sri Lankan government's "rehabilitation" plans

Panini Wijesiriwardana
28 January 2005

A month after the tsunami struck Sri Lanka, the breadth of the devastation is still unfolding. Extensive damage has been done to towns and cities along the eastern and southern coasts of the island. Whole villages were swept away, along with many of their inhabitants. Among the survivors seeking to cope with the losses, there is growing anger over the chaotic and limited character of the government's relief operations.

Government agencies are unable to agree on a figure for the number of dead. A report issued by the Task Force for Rebuilding the Nation (TAFREN) estimated the fatalities at 40,000. Another 6,000 were listed as missing and one million people as homeless. The public security ministry puts the death toll at just over 38,000, while the Centre for National Operations (CNO), which is meant to coordinate relief work, has it at 30,956.

Fishing families were particularly hard hit. The *Daily Mirror* on January 15 reported that 7,500 fishermen were killed, 5,600 were still missing and more than 90,000 had been displaced. Some 18,500 fishing boats had been damaged or destroyed. Also destroyed were 250,000 houses, 312 schools and 72 hospitals.

As part of its "rebuilding the nation" campaign, the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government has promised to provide housing for displaced persons, 5,000 rupees (\$US50) for every affected family and 2,500 rupees for individuals. The aid is, however, strictly limited to those who lost their livelihood as a direct result of the tsunami. Anyone with work, including fishermen who have repaired their nets and boats, will not be entitled to any assistance.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga has arbitrarily banned the building of houses within 100 metres of the sea for the south and west coasts and 200 metres for the north and east coasts. The government has promised to resettle survivors in safer areas away from the coast.

The order is a belated attempt to appear to be doing something to prevent a future disaster. But it is being imposed bureaucratically without any overall plan and with complete indifference to the consequences for ordinary people.

The decision has generated widespread anger among fishermen and their families who previously lived on the shoreline to protect their boats and nets, and to get ready access to the sea. A significant number of people, whose cafes, stalls and other small businesses catered to tourists in the country's coastal resorts, are also threatened with the loss of their livelihoods.

In some areas, the government has been wanting for some time to clear the foreshore for commercial purposes, including for major tourist resorts. Several years ago, plans were drawn up for a major harbour in the southern town of Hambantota to service shipping between the Middle East and East Asia. But the proposal was shelved due to fears that moving people off the land would provoke resistance and protests.

On January 15, the defence ministry directed police to strictly implement Kumaratunga's ban, provoking a series of protests. The following day, more than 300 fishermen demonstrated in Hambantota against police orders to leave their partly damaged or destroyed houses. Without their consent, the government is resettling these families at Kajuwatte, 3 km away from the coast. The following day, fishermen at Mirissa, a village in the southern Matara district, protested over same issue.

On January 19, several hundred Muslims held a demonstration in Hambantota against plans to shift them to Gonnoruwa, where Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse was laying the foundation stone for a new town. Gonnoruwa is an isolated, undeveloped area, surrounded by forest that is known for its dangerous

wild animals, including elephants.

On January 22, Rajapakse was jeered in his electorate of Hambantota when he tried to argue with people demonstrating against plans to resettle tsunami victims away from the beach. He was forced to walk away. On the same day in the southern coastal city of Galle, a group of shopkeepers protested against the same ban.

Other protests have taken place over the lack of aid and the arbitrary actions of authorities. On January 13, about 1,000 people demonstrated in the eastern town of Kalmunai against the clearing of debris without consultation, assessment of damage or rebuilding plans. The government has failed to provide even temporary shelter. Angry protesters chased away the representatives of Fariyal Ashrof, minister for housing, construction and eastern development and A.L.M. Athaulla, minister for eastern infrastructure.

Last Saturday, residents in the southern town of Boosa held a street protest against the government's failure to provide sufficient assistance and relief. On Monday, around 300 displaced people demonstrated outside the divisional secretariat office in Ambalangoda, 85 km south of Colombo, to demand tents and the provision of basic rations such as rice, sugar and lentils.

For many survivors, conditions are worsening. In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, the government turned many schools into relief camps. Now it has directed that the schools be cleared of refugees to enable the new school year to start.

In some cases, schools are being reopened in damaged buildings. According to the local TV channel Swarnavahini, there has been no proper inspection of school buildings to ascertain whether they are stable and safe.

The refugees are being forced to live in tents. Many have simply refused and are camping in the wreckage of their homes. Others have moved in with relatives. The WSWS spoke to refugees at Rahula College, one of the largest relief camps in Matara.

Hemachandra, a driver, said: "I have five children. How can we manage with this single tent? I saw a model of a tent and it is just like a kennel. There is no proper toilet system in the proposed camp. My house was made of wood and is severely damaged but I am thinking of moving there with the family."

Adlin, an elderly woman, expressed the same

opinion: "I am also going back to my damaged home. If you compare this tent with my home, I think, my home is a haven."

The Divisional Secretary of Pasgoda, Ranil Wickremasekare, told the WSWS: "There is no mechanism to provide any assurance that these partly damaged houses can be used for residential purposes." But he could offer no alternative, other than the tents.

In a report issued in mid-January, the Asian Development Bank estimated that the number of poor in Sri Lanka could rise by 250,000, or more than 1 percent of the population, as a result of the tsunami disaster. Releasing the report, ADB chief economist Ifzal Ali declared: "The poverty impact of the tsunami will be enormous."

Even before the tsunami, the World Bank's "Sri Lanka Development Policy Review", issued in December, found that about 25 percent of Sri Lankans lived below the poverty line. In two of the hardest hit regions—Hambantota and Batticaloa—one third of the population was living in poverty.

The Sri Lankan government was completely incapable of resolving these huge social problems before the tsunami struck. Now it is even less able to do so.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact