

# Sri Lanka: tsunami survivors in Jaffna criticise government

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Nearly two months after the December 26 tsunami, people affected in the coastal areas of the Jaffna peninsula in northern Sri Lanka are angry about the lack of help from the government or other organisations.

While President Chandrika Kumaratunga's government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are locked in a struggle for control of the limited relief funds offered by donor countries and international agencies, survivors are struggling with starvation.

WSWS correspondents revisited the tsunami-hit Vadamarachchi area on the Jaffna peninsula in late January and mid-February. If anyone thought the situation of the victims had improved since December 26, they would be shocked. After a brutal 20-year year civil war by the Sri Lankan authorities against the Tamil people in the north and east, these people have been left to bear the full burden of the tsunami disaster.

The Puloli Tamil Methodist mixed school, North Hindu girls school and Thambasity Methodist Tamil mixed school have become refugee camps, housing—respectively—520 people from 104 families, 145 people from 29 families, and 257 people from 70 families. These camps are managed by the LTTE-based Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO). No government representatives or officers are to be seen.

Without any proper sewerage system, the camps stink. There are flies everywhere and an obviously looming danger of epidemics. The toilet facilities are grossly inadequate—a few hundred people have to share three or four toilets, waiting in long queues to use them. Several families have to share each classroom due to the lack of space.

The government has promised to build new houses for affected families and, in the meantime, provide tents

for temporary accommodation. But the people complain that they have not even received tents. Most camp residents ask: "Is it possible that a government that has failed to even provide tents will resettle us in new houses and provide us jobs?"

They have no money for their basic daily needs. Relief coupons have been issued for 32 weeks. But each person receives 375 rupees (about \$US4) per week, which is barely adequate. We saw men with unshaven faces. They could not travel to other areas in the peninsula to visit their relatives affected by the tsunami or even attend funerals. One person said: "I have lost my three children. Some of my relatives living a few miles away were dead but I had no money to attend their funeral. We are living here like prisoners."

Displaced people from the Valvetithurai, Viyaparimulai, Athikoviladi, Polikandy, Impurity, Suparmadam, Kakaithivu, and Munai fishing villages are now being sent back to their damaged houses by authorities. But these areas are uninhabitable because they remain filled with debris from damaged houses, fishing nets, boats and other fishing equipment.

In the Manatkadu area, of all the buildings damaged by the tsunami, only the army camp has been reconstructed. People complain that military personnel utilised materials from damaged houses to rebuild the camp, creating further problems for local residents.

People who have been forced back to their damaged houses have arranged flimsy, makeshift repairs because they have no resources. Clothes have been used to replace walls, leaving houses only partially covered. In most cases, three or four families have to share each house. Because local wells were muddied by the tsunami, the shortage of drinking water is a grave problem. Water has been provided at only a few

bowzers, forcing people to walk several kilometres for fresh supplies.

The tsunami destroyed most people's jobs and livelihoods. They have no means of repairing fishing equipment, such as nets, machines and boats, without any assistance. The authorities also promised that boats would be repaired. Some boats were "repaired" in such a patchwork manner that they did not last even a few days. Fishermen's co-operative union representatives said it was a risk to use these boats in the sea.

The authorities have refused to provide earth-moving equipment or any other assistance to remove the huge rocks that now block the shallow places where fishing boats used to be moored. Government officials have told residents to clear the areas by themselves. For example, the 10-kilometre stretch from Valvetthurai to Munai is filled with rocks, each weighing about 75-100 kilograms. "How can men carry these rocks and remove them when it is necessary to use heavy vehicle such as bulldozers?" people angrily asked.

Rajan, a fisherman from the Manatkadu cooperative society, said: "What we need are houses and facilities for our fishing jobs. We don't know any other work. In our area, 75 people died because of the barbed-wire fences that were put up along coastal areas by the army. The waves that damaged and carried barbed-wire, trapped people and they could not move. Yet, all the army camps have been reconstructed in the north and east."

Victoria, 47, from Manatkadu, expressed distrust in the government and the LTTE. "If we tried to commit suicide, the government authorities would lock us up and hold an inquiry. We are now starving to death but what is this government going to do? Who will come to help us—the government? Other organisations [meaning the LTTE]? Or students [supporting the LTTE]?"

Dharshini, who is staying at the Kudathanai government Tamil mixed school camp, said 16 families were living in a classroom and the threat of an epidemic was very real. Everyone complained about the government.

Mahaluxmi, 59, said they had garlic and chilli porridge that day. "We all are worrying about our children. Some schools have reopened but how can our unfed children be sent to school? Some children have fainted in schools because they went without proper meals. I need 150 rupees to buy milk powder for my

child. There are about 100 children in this village. If we go and ask for milk from the authorities they simply don't care."

At the Puloly Methodist mixed school camp, Panneerselvam, 44, had lost his wife and three children. Edman Rajah, 34, from Manatkadu had lost three children out of his four. They blamed the police for not registering them for compensation. Rajah had visited the police on 15 separate days to complain. Some people from Manatkadu had been shifted to huts built in Kudathanai with metal sheets. But they complained that it was difficult to live in the huts because of the heat.

Roads have been cleared for vehicle traffic, but no action has been taken to remove other debris. In some areas, such as Munai and Supermadam, residents have attempted to clear the wreckage.

There were 300 families—war refugees from Kankasanthura in the 1990s—in the Supermadam area. LTTE political wing members came and told them to vacate the school to facilitate its reopening. Families did as they were ordered but did not receive any help to rebuild their houses. Jesuthasan, 49, had tried to repair his house using saris as walls.

Tsunami victims also criticised politicians from the LTTE-aligned Tamil National Alliance. "In the election period they came here asking for our votes. Now they are not visiting us. If they come again seeking our votes we have to chase them away," people said.

Kamala Nathan, the secretary of the Supermadam fishermen's cooperative, said that because of the high cost of land, it would be an impossible dream to build a house if the government imposed its rule to ban houses within 300 metres of the sea. "How can we expect a good house in a proper place from a government which ignores us in such small things as providing food and even water?" he asked.



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