On-the-spot report

Growing dissatisfaction in eastern Sri Lanka over lack of aid

Part One

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15 February 2005

This is the first in a two-part report by World Socialist Web Site *correspondents who visited Ampara district in the east of the Sri Lanka and spoke to the victims of the December 26 tsunami.*

Even before the tsunami hit Sri Lanka, the Eastern Province was one of the poorest and most economically backward regions of the island. Like the Northern Province, the area has been ravaged by two decades of civil war and many people live below the poverty line. It has one of the lowest levels of infrastructure including roads and telecommunications in the country.

The disaster has compounded all of these social problems, destroying jobs, homes and facilities, and condemning many more people to poverty. More than 166,000 people are now homeless with about 80,000 currently in 73 overcrowded refugee camps and the rest living with relatives or fending for themselves. Some 29,373 houses, 50 schools, and 477 religious buildings and other structures were completely destroyed. The official death toll is 7,154 people and 391 missing, but eyewitnesses say at least 25,000 people were killed.

We spent three days travelling in Ampara's coastal areas. While rival political parties were stoking up communal tensions, Tamil and Muslim refugees recalled with gratitude the selfless support they received from Sinhalese people. Distrust of the government and government officials is widespread and increasing. This has been compounded by allegations of corruption, including the misuse and appropriation of emergency aid.

On February 4, a few days after we left, the *Daily Mirror* reported that a large number of Muslims had protested outside the Kalmunai divisional secretariat after Friday prayers over the unfair distribution of aid. The resentment has been fuelled in part by highly publicised inauguration ceremonies for new housing projects for tsunami victims in the Sinhalese south of the island. No such schemes have been started in the East.

One protestor told the newspaper: "We want homes, boats and fishing nets, we want our children to go back to school and face examinations. No government relief has reached us so far and we are surviving thanks to the aid brought in by NGOs and other individuals. No Muslim ministers or MPs are concerned about our plight.

"The divisional secretary [DS], the additional DS and the administrative officer should all be transferred. We don't care even if their replacements are Tamils as long as they are honest. We are here to fight for the rights of Tamils as well".

Angry Tamils spoke to the *Daily Mirror* about the deteriorating hygiene in eight refugee camps that house hundreds of people. They said they would be forced to seriously consider seizing land, unless they were allocated decent accommodation.

We first visited Ampara township, 20 km inland, where a large number of displaced people have taken refuge, and subsequently travelled to Karaitivu, Kalmunai, Akkaraipattu and Thirukkovil on the coast.

In the absence of adequate government assistance, conditions in the refugee camps have seriously deteriorated over the past month with the danger of malaria, diarrhea and skin disease ever present. Water supply is irregular and grossly inadequate and hundreds of families are forced to share the three or four toilets in each camp.

The government provides only 2 kg of rice, 1 kg of sugar and 1 kg of lentils per person per week. But there are many who are denied these meagre rations because, officials claim, they did not suffer any "direct losses". Many refugees fear that the government will even stop these limited supplies. Hardly any aid has reached remote areas such as Thirukkovil.

Medical supplies are inadequate and dwindling. Akkaraipattu hospital, for example, which is nominally a base hospital, lacks basic medical equipment, buildings, doctors and other health staff. None of the hospitals in the area have psychiatrists or counsellors to treat the widespread cases of psychological trauma.

Dr. M.J. Nowfel, the Medical Officer at Akkaraipattu, explained: "I requested help from the local authority to supply the refugees' basic needs and to clean the areas. But the response has been zero." He added that the government had not helped either. Nowfel said that the danger of malaria and dengue was acute, there had been sporadic cases of diarrhea and many patients were suffering from skin diseases.

Many of the tsunami victims were fishermen. They are angry that the government has used the disaster to ban people from resettling within 200 metres of the seashore. They said that the directive was not to protect them from future dangers but to clear the coastline for the tourist industry.

After President Chandrika Kumaratunga directed the security forces to take charge of relief operations, the army and police have extended their operations in the area. Heavily-armed police from the Special Task Force (STF) are in charge of the refugee camps. We had to obtain their permission to enter and refugees have to sign a book before leaving. The STF is notorious for its abuse, particularly of Tamils.

In **Ampara**, the refugee centre was located just outside the hospital. Nominally run by the Church of Ceylon, the camp, was, in fact, controlled by the security forces, with troops outnumbering refugees. Most of the displaced were from Kalmunai.

Poomani, 32, a mother of three children, said: "We have survived up to now on the food supplied by Sinhalese people. The government supplies never came in time to save us. But how can we continue to live like this and when will we get meals like we used to have before the incident?"

Poomani dismissed government promises to pay 5,000 rupees ($US50)

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to each affected family. “I haven’t seen a single cent for the last 35 days. When will our children be able go to school?” she asked. “Information has been collected from us but where will we end up? Up to now no one has given a firm word about our resettlement.”

Paul, 25, whose father had been a fisherman in Kalmunai, said: “I don’t know what the government is planning to do about us. Our future is uncertain.” L. Selvarajh, 64, a driver, added: “The people in the camp have decided not to go anywhere until the government tells us where we are going to be settled and what sort of housing we will be provided with”.

Thirty-year-old K. Sunil, a welder, explained that the village level government officer had told refugees to “find land” and that he would “make arrangements” to provide them with tents. “But how are we supposed to do this? It is the duty of the government to find land for us,” he said.

In **Karaitivu**, there are 2,908 displaced families in four relief camps. We visited the R.K.M. boys’ school camp, which houses 505 people, and received a warm response from the people who were anxious to vent their anger against the government.

Ilayathamby Pakyarajh, 32, who lost four children and his wife, said: “President Kumaratunga came and promised good living conditions until we were settled permanently within six months. But we are still living without proper food and sanitary conditions. This shows what the government has in store for us in the coming months.”

Ehambaram, 65, a fisherman, explained: “Minister Farial Ashraff [National United Alliance leader] came here and promised to do lot of things but up to now there has been no action. We have been informed that in future weeks we will be issued a ration card for 375 rupees a week a person. Without any job how can you live on this?”

A group of people gathered around us all anxious to tell us their views: three fishermen— Nandakumar, 24, and Sri Bala Shanthakumar, 25, and Rasa Mahadevan, 38, who lost his wife and children—and Udayakumar, 24, a day labourer. In the course of the discussion, Bala Shnathakumar explained: “Everyone who comes here assures us that we will be provided houses and jobs but no one says when, where and how. We’ve been asked by authorities to vacate the school building where we are now.”

Rasa Mahadevan added: “They tried to take us to Valathepathy and Malwatta—both areas far from the sea. We refused to go because it would deprive of us our livelihood, that is fishing. What we want are well-constructed houses in our own area.”

Parasuraman Kengesabapathy, 62, said: “Finance Minister Sarath Amunugama came here and went without any concrete promise. We have not seen the TNA [Tamil National Alliance] MP Kanagasabe for whom we voted. We live by fishing. We are paid only one tenth of the value of our catch and the major portion goes to the boat owner. He too is now helpless having lost his boat and net. We have no job opportunities now.”

Kalmunai, a coastal town bordering the Batticaloa district to the north, was our next stop.

There were 8,770 displaced families in 20 relief camps. These included the Fatima College camp with 353 families, Wesley high school with 215 families, and another relief camp in a Sinhala school with 197 families. Twenty-six families have been transferred from the Sinhala school to a nearby location and are living in tents donated by the Kalmunai Rotary Club.

T. Dushyanthi, a 17-year-old girl at the Fatima relief camp, lost both her parents. “I can’t sleep, thinking of my dead family. I can’t think of a life without them,” she told us. “Two weeks ago government officers came and asked me some questions but they left and have not come back. How am I supposed to believe that the government is going to assist me? We are completely helpless.”

Sixteen-year-old Vairamuthu Thatchyini, who just completed her grade 10 examinations, lost eight of her family members, including both parents. “I am the only one left,” she said. “There is no one to look after me and if we are removed from the camp I have nowhere to go. I can’t continue my education and have no alternative but suicide.”

Pathmanathan Pushparanie, 24, who lost her father and mother, said: “I don’t know what to do next—to live or to die. I wish that I’d also been washed away.” S.I. Jaleel, 15, another refugee lost 13 members of his family and is currently being looked after by others in the camp.

Many refugees complained about the inadequate medical facilities at the camp and said the lack of medical care. Nadarajah Wimala, 40, said, “My husband is a diabetic but we have no money for his medicine. The medical officers who visited us said they didn’t have any either.”

Government food supplies to the camp are limited to a few items—rice, lentils and sugar. One refugee explained that although the LTTE-based Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO) had supplied some pots and stoves, they had not provided vegetables or other provisions. “The TRO used come here often but now it is only once a week,” he said.

E. Thilagawathi, 40, a mother of seven children, said: “My husband was a fisherman but I lost him. How am I supposed send my children to school? I don’t hope for any government assistance. We don’t get enough milk powder for our babies and I can only feed my baby son milk once a day. I can’t provide him milk when he cries in hunger. Why should I expect a house and other benefits [from the government] in the future?”

At the Islamabad Muslim refuge camp in Kalmunai, there were 1,365 refugees, packed into a hall made from aluminum sheeting and iron bars and partitioned into 60 units. Almost all of the refugees were fishermen who had lost all of their fishing gear. Ministry of Fisheries and Water Resource officials had collected information about their losses, but nothing had been done. Water supplies were inadequate or there were no sanitary facilities at the camp.

Vadivel Gopalapillai, 44, a local TNA representative, said that Sinhalese people from Ampara had provided desperately needed food and clothing. “If not for them,” he said, “we would have died waiting for the other so-called aid to arrive.”

He openly criticised a local TNA MP. “All these people voted for TNA parliamentarian Pathmanathan in the last general elections but 33 days have passed and he still hasn’t come here. In fact, none of the TNA parliamentarians have visited. But if they don’t come to see me, how are they going to see ordinary people and provide for their needs?” he asked.

Letchchimee Kanthan, who was selected to study veterinary science at the University of Peradeniya in Kandy, warned of the danger of starvation. “We have no possibility of continuing our studies so the majority of us have decided to discontinue our education and find whatever work we can to get food each day. If the conditions in the camp don’t improve, we could die of malnutrition,” she said.

To be continued

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