

On-the-spot report

# Sri Lankan refugees speak out over inadequate aid

## Part Two

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*This is the last in a two-part series 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. Part One was published on February 15.*

Although there are more than 1,060 homeless families in Akkaraipattu, there is only one refugee camp in the area. Located at the Mery Gold Garment factory hall, it provides accommodation for about 90 families. The remaining refugees have been forced to live with relatives or friends.

M.A. Nisswa, 26, a carpenter, said that although Athaulla, the infrastructure development minister for the eastern province, and Segu Isadeen, a government parliamentarian, had visited the area and made promises, nothing had changed for homeless families.

“We’ve had to take shelter with our relatives and although we’ve been officially registered as displaced we receive no regular rations. A week ago we were given two kilograms of rice, a kilo of dhal and a kilo of sugar but there’s been nothing since then,” he said.

A number of people we met in Akkaraipattu accused the local divisional secretariat of selling relief provisions worth 400,000 rupees (\$US4,000) to private businesses. While the divisional secretary has denied these allegations, a protest about the issue was held in the town on January 28.

Adam Lebbai Ubaitulla, 27, a local sports club president, told us that he was prepared to give evidence to any investigation and A.L. Thavam, president of the Civil Society, a local charity, said the complaints were true. He explained that 1,475 tsunami refugees had only

been issued dry rations once in the past 35 days.

We visited the Mery Gold Garment factory camp, which is located in an isolated area and controlled by the notorious Special Task Force (STF). The STF is made up of specially-trained police commando units that worked alongside the military in the country’s protracted civil war.

The STF officer on duty told us that we could not enter until he obtained permission from a higher officer. Forty-five minutes later we were given permission but were accompanied by two divisional secretariat officers throughout our visit. Despite their presence, refugees spoke frankly about the increasingly desperate conditions at the camp.

We met 10-year-old Jawfar, who has a serious heart condition. His mother explained: “He was scheduled to have a heart-valve operation at Nawaloka hospital [a leading private hospital] in Colombo on January 15 but we lost all the money donated to pay for it. I don’t know what is going to happen to Jawfar because he is not getting the special attention he needs at this camp.”

Breakfast at the camp mainly consists of plain bread. Infants had not been issued milk powder for three days and there were no facilities to prepare milk when the babies need it.

A.L. Udeema Lebbai, 50, a fisherman, complained: “If we go anywhere asking for assistance, they [the officials] ask for all sorts of documents. But how are we supposed to provide them when we’ve lost everything?”

Razik Fareed, 42, said: “We are given cooked meals here but they are not provided at the proper times. It is

now 3:30 pm, and we still have not had our meal. Our hungry children have cried themselves to sleep.”

Uwaisa, an expectant mother, said: “You know how a pregnant mother should eat but we only get bread in the morning and our babies are not supplied proper milk foods. We are given tea at 9 am. It is not tea though, but some sort of colored water.”

We also visited Alayadivembu, which has over 3,000 homeless in three relief camps. Many of these people, however, were being moved out of school buildings that had functioned as refugee camps and into tent accommodation.

M. Nagenamali, president of the fishermen’s co-operative society in the area, was staying in a tent in the grounds of a Methodist church. “We were staying in a school but had to move out when the classes started. We arrived here a week ago and get meals with help from the NGOs but there is no assistance from the government,” he said.

The next town we visited was Thirukkivil. The road between from Akkaraipattu and Thirukkivil runs between a lagoon and the sea, which laps against the road even during normal conditions. When the tsunami hit the area hundreds of people were swept away.

According to official reports, there are 19,888 refugees currently accommodated in 10 camps. Another 978 displaced families are living with their relatives.

We met Ratnam Poonkothai Devi, 44, a mother of three, in the bus to Thirukkivil. A professional midwife and former resident of Pandiruppu, she was now displaced and living in the Wesley College refugee camp. She explained some of her bitter experiences during the war.

“The STF abducted my husband in 1990. His whereabouts are still unknown and I’ve had great difficulty bringing up my three children. Although I live in a refugee camp I still have to report to work on time. As you can see, the transport situation here is very difficult.”

As we approached the town we saw a small building adjoining the road. It was covered with cardboard and plastic sheeting. As we got closer, we realised that it was a bus stand that had been turned into a refugee camp.

Even though it was not officially recorded as a camp, 22 families had been sheltering in the structure for the past 35 days. Thambipillai Selvarani, 32, one of the

residents, said: “We have no toilet facilities, no milk for our infants and haven’t had tea for last 15 days.” A plastic water tank has been installed outside the structure but it was empty and had no tap.

We visited the Shakthi school camp in Thirukkivil, which has 817 refugees. Conditions there were not much better than at the bus stand. People told us that we were the first media representatives to visit the area since the disaster.

Thambimuththu Ganesapillai, 54, said: “We are in a desperate situation. I don’t know why the government can’t understand that food is a basic human need. The TRO [Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation, a LTTE based organisation] has given us a cooking pot and a bucket and the LTTE has supplied some medicine.”

The STF has issued a card stating that it would provide 6,000 rupees in relief items but the refugees told us that nothing had been provided since the card was issued. Nor had they received the 5,000 rupees promised to each displaced family by the government.

We met S.T. Abdul Sathar, a local fisheries inspector, who told us that he had collected detailed information about all the fishermen affected by the December 26 tsunami and sent it to the fishing ministry. It is their responsibility, he said, to take the necessary actions. He admitted, however, that the fishermen had not received any of the promised government compensation.

A.L. Farook, a fisherman, complained: “We used to sell our fish to these officers. They knew us then, now they don’t even notice us. We heard about corruption in divisional secretariat office and it may be true because we haven’t been given any relief aid for last 35 days. What has the government done any way?”

M.M.S. Kaleel, a fisherman who lost his house in Akkaraipattu asked: “It’s a month since the killer waves struck. Why can’t the government build satisfactory temporary shelters for survivors? How long are we supposed to stay with relatives? I’m shunted from various government authorities trying to find out how to claim compensation.”

*Concluded*



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