

SEP meeting in Sri Lanka explains social roots of tsunami disaster

Our correspondent
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More than 100 people attended a public meeting on “The Asian Tsunami Disaster: Causes and the Consequences” in the Colombo public library auditorium on February 1. The gathering reflected an important response to the analysis made by the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) of Sri Lanka.

Workers, students, youth, intellectuals and housewives were among the audience, from different communities, Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim alike. Some travelled to Colombo from other areas, including Chilaw in North Western Province and Ambalangoda in Southern Province.

The SEP’s campaign for the meeting covered important industrial areas, such as Jayawadanagama, a Colombo suburb, and Katunayake, Sri Lanka’s major free trade zone, where many people expressed suspicion over the presence of the US marines in Sri Lanka for “relief work”.

The meeting opened with a minute’s silence for the tens of thousands of people in South Asia who had perished. Chaired by the meeting, SEP political committee member Vilani Peiris explained that the SEP was the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the only organisation in the world to analyse the causes and the consequences of the disaster from the standpoint of the working class.

She pointed to the many articles on the WSWs examining the response to the tsunami, and the series of public meetings organised by the ICFI. “We have called these meetings in order to discuss the historical and political issues underlying the tsunami disaster and to advance the socialist alternative to poverty, social inequality and war.”

Referring to the latest available reports, Peiris outlined the human cost of the disaster. “If we calculate the real death toll, we must add the numbers of disappeared people to the official figures. There is no doubt that the actual toll across Asia will exceed 300,000.” The failure of every government in the region to even provide honest and accurate estimates of the fatalities revealed in itself the level of official indifference.

Nanda Wickremasinghe, an SEP central committee

member, exposed the attitude of the US authorities. The Pacific Tsunami Warning Center in Honolulu had informed the US State Department of a possible tsunami in the Indian Ocean by 2.04 a.m. GMT on December 26, more than an hour and a half before the waves struck the Sri Lankan and Indian coasts. But the State Department had alerted only Diego Garcia, the Indian Ocean island where the US has a military base.

Wickremasinghe also indicted the governments of the region for the failure to develop a tsunami warning system despite the massive technological capacities that now existed. “When these bankrupt national bourgeois regimes talk about national defence, they talk of the defence of the state apparatus and wealth, not the poor masses.”

K. Ratnayake, a member of the WSWs International Editorial Board and the SEP central committee, contrasted the official and popular responses to the disaster. He noted that millions of people all over the world had showed their sympathy and sent significant relief aid to the countries affected by the tsunami.

This response recalled the global opposition to the Iraq war, demonstrated in the international rallies on February 15 and 16, 2003. “On the eve of the US invasion of Iraq, millions took to the streets to express their opposition. We see tendencies underneath for the unity of international working people.”

“In Sri Lanka the ruling elite has used anti-Tamil communalism to divide the working people for decades leading to a 20-year civil war. But what we saw following the disaster was thousands of people helping to rescue survivors and to provide relief regardless of ethnic and religious divisions,” the speaker explained.

“You all may have an obvious question: Why there was no tsunami early warning system in the Indian Ocean zone, where billions of people live? All the governments of these countries, the opposition parties and the media—that is, the entire political establishment—have suppressed this question. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the total cost of the installation of a warning system covering all oceans would

be just \$US150 million.

“But the Sri Lankan and other governments have no interest in installing such protective instruments. Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan government spends \$520 million annually on war expenditure for the civil war. The Indian government allocates about \$15 billion for defence. They have no concern for the safety and the social conditions of the millions of people they rule.”

Outlining the conditions in the refugee camps, Ratnayake said there were two worlds. Even 37 days after the tsunami, there were still camps where WWSW correspondents visited survivors who had not received any government relief aid. But the government was boasting of constructing big cities and infrastructure, and providing other facilities.

“All the social, political and economic problems have been intensified. Whether it is Sri Lanka or Indonesia, it is same—attacks on living standards and war-mongering have resurfaced. In this country, the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government and the ruling elite have no solution to the economic and political crisis.”

“In Sri Lanka, who are the affected people?” Ratnayake asked. “Twenty five percent of Sri Lankans live in coastal areas. They are fishermen, small farmers, the landless, and those who do odd jobs. More than six million people live in ‘semi-permanent houses’—huts and shanties—mostly on the coast. In Sri Lanka, the top 10 percent of the population receives 39 percent of the national income while the bottom 10 percent receives only 1.1 percent. Most coastal dwellers are in the latter category.”

Turning to the role of the major capitalist countries, Ratnayake cited figures relating to the huge debt repayments made by countries such as Sri Lanka to the world financial centres. He also explained that substantial trade barriers existed. According to a *Wall Street Journal* report, \$US249 million were paid each year in tariffs on Sri Lankan goods exported to the US, 12 times more than the local tariffs imposed on US imports.

The real objectives of the US intervention in the region had nothing to do with genuine humanitarian relief, Ratnayake said. “Just after announcing its relief package, the US sent its largest-ever troop contingent to the region since the Vietnam War. There were 13,000 marines and 20 warships.”

As with the Iraq war, this reaction was driven by the attempt to overcome militarily the deteriorating economic situation of the US. Washington was trying to establish world hegemony by subjugating resource- and labour-rich countries. In order to avoid a new period of world war, and utilise the advanced technology that existed to minimise the consequences of natural disasters, the international working class had to base itself on a global socialist perspective.

There was a strong response to the meeting. Participants remained until the end and, after an appeal by the chair, donated more than 2,500 rupees to the SEP fund. After the meeting, people gathered around the literature table and had discussions with SEP members.

Srinath, a school canteen worker, said: “The most important parts of the speeches described the response to the disaster by the major powers. Before the meeting, I thought that the Sri Lankan government was receiving a huge relief package from America. All the media painted that type of picture. Now I know that the American government is involved here for its own interests. They are exploiting the December 26 disaster just as they utilised the September 11 incident for their global strategy. The meeting was insightful.”

Kamalairi, a construction industry painter, commented: “All the media, the politicians and so many pundits told us that the consequences of the disaster were inevitable. But your speakers explained that this was not the case. They proved it with real facts and figures in an interesting way.

“To utilise the technological achievements for the sake of mankind we must overthrow this profit-based system. That is what I mainly assimilated from this meeting. I was a member of the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna—the second largest party in the UPFA government) but I realised that they are not Marxists, as they pretend. During last year I followed your articles and participated in every meeting that you organised in Colombo. Your ideas have transformed me into a different man.”

Most participants attended a SEP meeting for the first time. Piyadasa, a hospital worker, said: “I was searching for a real analysis of the tsunami disaster and a scientific program to prevent these types of tragedies. I don’t believe in the programs of ‘national unity’ and ‘rebuilding the nation’ promoted by the rulers. That is why I came here to find a new path.”



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