

Sri Lankan SEP holds meeting in tsunami-affected Matara

Our correspondent
4 April 2005

The Sri Lankan Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held a public meeting on the political issues raised by the Asian tsunami at the Ruhunu Cultural Centre in Matara on March 27. The audience included workers, young people, university students and some direct victims of the December 26 disaster.

Matara is a district capital in the southern coastal belt of Sri Lanka, one of the areas badly hit by the tsunami, with many people left destitute. A local government official recently told the *Sunday Times*: “Currently 3,325 people are still living in welfare centres and camps, while thousands of others are living with friends and relatives.” Fishermen are among the thousands of people who have lost their livelihoods.

In campaigning for the meeting, SEP members found that three months after the tsunami, few improvements have taken place in the living conditions of the victims. Immediately after the tsunami, they were housed in government buildings and schools. Now they are forced to live in huts and tents provided by various non-government organisations (NGOs).

The government promised to construct housing schemes at nearby Kammalwatta and Nupewela. Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and Media Minister Mangala Samaraweera both visited the area and made a great show of laying foundation stones. But no work has begun.

Fishermen who lost their boats can do nothing but stare at the sea helplessly. Punchihewa, a fisherman from Matara Fort, told the WSWS: “Even if we were to receive boats and other equipment, we cannot go fishing. Without a permanent house how can we leave our families?”

Many of those affected were angry about broken government promises and delays. Initially some felt that the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the second largest partner of the ruling coalition, might help, but are now disillusioned with their empty populist promises. The JVP’s demagogues pledged to assist the victims and

carried out their own limited relief works.

A young fisherman was sharply critical of the JVP. “The portfolios of land and the fisheries are held by JVP ministers. Without taking any steps to solve our problems, they blame the other partners in the government. This is a fraud. They themselves are cabinet ministers and are responsible for all the actions and inaction of the government,” he said.

Another fisherman, Jayarathne, was angry with the opposition United National Front (UNF). “The UNF is exploiting the situation for its own sake. Mahinda Wijesekara, the former fisheries minister and MP for Matara, called two meetings at his home for tsunami-affected fishermen but we all refused to attend. We had repeatedly pointed out to him and other politicians that a wall was needed around [Matara] fort to protect people against large waves.

“At that time we didn’t know about tsunamis. Like the others, he didn’t respond to our request and now he pretends to be concerned about us. If we had had a wall it would have saved at least 20 lives. He is not concerned about our plight but about winning the next election. We don’t believe any party.”

The SEP’s public meeting was chaired by Central Committee member Panini Wijesiriwardane. He explained that the SEP and *World Socialist Web Site* had organised a series of meetings in Sri Lanka and internationally.

Outlining the continuing difficulties faced by working people, Wijesiriwardane said: “The housing problem is a major one. People who lived within 100 metres from the shoreline are not allowed to rebuild their houses on lands they previously occupied. The government has so far failed even to identify a single piece of alternative land where people can build. Meanwhile, the government has already started to construct a modern town with all the facilities that businesses need at Godagama—the starting

point of the proposed highway from Matara to Colombo.

“When we talked to the relevant authorities we learnt that these projects were planned well before the tsunami to attract international and national investors. The government’s priority is business infrastructure and not the needs of the working people. There are two worlds in Matara. Well-equipped modern townships for the rich and temporary huts and tents for the tsunami-affected poor.”

Wijesiriwardane concluded by explaining: “This disaster exemplifies the historical and political problems that workers and the oppressed masses face under capitalism. That is why the working class needs a scientific perspective to confront these issues and to provide a progressive socialist solution.”

Wije Dias, SEP general secretary and a member of the WSWs International Editorial Board, delivered the main report to the meeting. He began by referring to comments by Mano Tittawela, chairman of the Task Force for Rebuilding the Nation (TAFREN), at a seminar the previous week.

“This same Tittawela, appointed head of TAFREN by President Chandrika Kumaratunga, unveiled a plan for so-called nation building on January 23 with huge media publicity. Two months later, he now admits that no such plan exists. Here is what he told the seminar: ‘We have agreed that consultation, implementation, assistance from everybody concerned, including donors, NGOs, INGOs, civil society, etc., must happen on the ground level so that effective policies can be put in place and more importantly effective implementation is ensured. We are hoping that this team will come up with a comprehensive plan vis-à-vis what has to be done in terms of the action plan but also how it should be done. This would be ready in the next few weeks’.

“This statement makes clear that the TAFREN rehabilitation plan is subject to the approval of international donors and other funding agencies and that approval has not been given even two months after the government’s plan was submitted,” Dias said.

The speaker explained that the government and international agencies failed to issue any warning to those living in coastal areas before the tsunami occurred. Their response to the plight of the victims after the disaster was no different. “The government has only laid the foundation stones for housing schemes. And, according to the government treasury secretary, of the pledges made by so-called donor countries not even 10 percent has materialised as cash payments,” he said.

“This is the opposite of the way that the major powers,

particularly the US, reacted to the devastation caused by World War II in Europe and Asia. For its own economic reasons, the US took the initiative, utilising its vast resources to rebuild the countries devastated by war.

“Today the Bush administration utilises its military power to subjugate the world at the cost of the lives, democratic rights and social conditions of millions of people around the world. The change is not due to the peculiar personal characteristics of Bush and his coterie but is a product of the insoluble crisis that world capitalism faces today. The elites in semi-colonial countries, epitomised by the puppet prime minister Ayad Allawi in Iraq, toe the line of US imperialism.

“These transformed political and social conditions are reflected in the way the major powers and their crony regimes in countries like Sri Lanka reacted to the plight of hundreds of thousands of people affected by tsunami. This poses a crucial question: How can the working people overcome the social disasters they face under the capitalist world order? We as Marxists unhesitatingly propose a struggle for capitalism’s overthrow and its replacement by an international socialist system as the only solution.”

The report opened up a lively discussion on a range of issues. A university student asked: “How are we to believe that you are not going to betray like other left parties?” Dias took the opportunity to briefly review the history of the SEP and the international Trotskyist movement. He explained that the betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) was the product of a protracted nationalist degeneration that had its roots in the refusal of the party to join the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in 1953.

The Revolutionary Communist League, the SEP’s predecessor, was founded in 1968 out of the political struggle against the LSSP’s decision to join the bourgeois government of Mrs Bandaranaike in 1964, Dias said. “We have a proud heritage of fighting against all forms of revisionism that leads to capitulation and betrayal of the international socialist course.”



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