

Sri Lankan chauvinists stir up tensions in tsunami-affected East

Priyadarshana Meddawatta, A. Shanthakumar
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In the immediate aftermath of the December 26 tsunami, many ordinary working people in Sri Lanka—Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala—spontaneously came to the aid of victims, regardless of religion or ethnicity. This reaction was particularly significant in a country in which the ruling elites have deliberately whipped up communal animosities time and again and prosecuted a disastrous and protracted civil war.

Now, however, a number of chauvinist groups are actively engaged in fomenting tensions to divert, along communal lines, the growing hostility and anger among tsunami victims over government inaction. This was evident when WSWs correspondents visited the port city of Trincomalee on the island's east coast last month.

About 1,100 people in Trincomalee district were killed in the disaster. According to official figures released on March 10, 126,679 people from 30,547 families were affected. Three months after the tragedy, 3,321 families are still living in primitive conditions in 33 relief camps. Another 11,965 families are relying on relatives or friends.

Many of those displaced, particularly Tamils, have already suffered as a result of the racist war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam over the past two decades. The population of Trincomalee is divided into roughly equal numbers of Sinhalese and Tamils with a significant Muslim population. The town has frequently been the target of chauvinist organisations.

When we visited Trincomalee a Buddhist monk, Nandaratana Thera, was leading a Sathyagraha or sit-in protest in the town's centre. While his supporters claimed the monk was acting on his own, it later emerged that the North East Sinhala Organisation (NESO), a rabid Sinhala communalist group, was involved.

In the course of the day, a banner that had been at the town centre reading "Provide relief for Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim people" was taken down and replaced by one with the communal slogan "Do not evacuate Sinhalese from Trincomalee." It was later changed to another demand: "Do not establish a joint government-LTTE rehabilitation authority".

The Colombo government has been under pressure from donor countries to work with the LTTE in the distribution of aid through a joint authority. Groups such as the NESO

vehemently oppose any concession to the LTTE and claim that the establishment of such a mechanism would legitimise the LTTE.

Efforts toward joint relief work have stalled because of opposition within the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) from the chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). The NESO finally called off the protest in Trincomalee when President Chandrika Kumaratunga accommodated to its demands. After meeting with Kumaratunga's representatives, the NESO announced that the government had promised never to remove Sinhala settlements from Trincomalee district or agree to a joint-aid authority.

The NESO and the JVP are competing with one another for influence among poor Sinhala peasants in the district. The NESO's protest followed a provocative JVP demonstration early in March during which its activists attempted to construct shelters in a large, open area of Trincomalee known as McKeyzer Stadium. The protest resulted in a physical confrontation with Tamils angry that a parliamentary committee decision to build housing elsewhere had been flouted.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a pro-LTTE coalition, is also stoking up communal suspicion by claiming that the government is planning a new wave of Sinhala settlements in Trincomalee. The issue raises tensions because previous governments have encouraged Sinhala settlements in predominantly Tamil areas as a means of providing land for poor Sinhala villagers and to break up the LTTE's social base.

Nevertheless, we found that the majority of those affected by the tsunami—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—feel they face common problems. Their anger is directed at the government and more broadly at all politicians, whom they accuse of failing to do anything to alleviate their plight.

On March 9 and 14, thousands of victims staged a protest in Trincomalee, demanding government relief and permanent housing. The District Secretary responded to the protest demands by declaring that the necessary steps would be carried out, but nothing has been done.

The WSWs reporting team spoke to a number of people affected by the tsunami.

Mayawan, 58, a fisherman who is living in a tent, said:

“Eighty percent of those affected are fishermen. We feel that the government should consider everyone affected the same. But we see there is discrimination between the South and the North East. The JVP’s fisheries minister, Chandrasena Wijesinghe came here and gave small things to selected people.

“In his speech, Wijesinghe said that all communities would be looked after without any difference. But on day two, the JVP planned to settle some Sinhalese in the McKeyzer ground. They took materials to the area and with armed guards. If they are settling affected Sinhalese then we should also be settled. We Sinhalese and Tamils live together.”

A. K. Leelawathee, 40, a mother of four living at the main bus stand in Trincomalee, said: “We have been living at the bus stand for three months. JVP MP Jayantha Wijesekera came once and promised to give us housing but nothing has happened. It has all been confined to words so far.”

There were another three families sheltering at the bus stand. Along the north central main road in Trincomalee, we found more than 20 families who have been hit by the tsunami camped in squalid conditions. When we spoke to a district official about these conditions he shifted the buck to another government organisation—the Transitory Shelter Project for Tsunami Affected Families. Despite several attempts to make contact, its office was always closed.

At the town of Muthur, a predominantly Muslim area about an hour by boat from Trincomalee, there were 1,758 displaced people in seven refugee camps—all run by non-government organisations (NGOs).

Misriya, 42, mother of three, described the conditions. “The NGOs provide us with temporary shelter and water. We are getting only rice, sugar and lentils. The weekly ration is worth 175 rupees [\$US1.75] and we get another 200 rupees per week. How can we manage with this! For the whole period [since the tsunami], we have received rations for only four weeks. There is no light here at night and there are snakes around. Because our boats and nets were destroyed, our husbands can’t earn a living fishing.”

Mahira, mother of six, had a similar story. “We got milk and food for our children in the first days but have received nothing over the last two months. Our children are still not going to school. Because of the conditions here, we feel like going back to our damaged houses. Not a single politician has come to visit us.”

The NGOs have provided sleeping mats in some camps but in others, people are using old clothes. Some volunteers visit the camps from time to time and provide health care but there are no government medical facilities. Most people felt that things would only get worse, not better. While some refugees were managing to earn a little money, most had no income.

At Kinniya, 15 kilometres south of Trincomalee, over 5,200 people are living in eight temporary welfare centres. The situation at the Kinniya central school camp is worse than other centres. Survivors have not been received the 5,000 rupees

[\$US50] in aid promised by the government. As the school is now a refugee camp, teaching is carried out in huts. Students and refugees jointly protested to demand relief aid and proper accommodation but there has been no government response.

Nigaisa, 39, a mother of three, said: “We have been here since December 27. The divisional secretary’s office is 200 metres from here. But no facilities have been provided to start a new life. Temporary toilets were built but now they are all full. The school has three toilets and we are all using them—students, teachers and refugees.”

Deputy school principal M. Hassan explained: “We face many difficulties at the school. We can’t abandon the refugees and teach for two sessions. The refugees here are disappointed because the promised government resettlement projects have not materialised.” A local official confirmed that there were no concrete resettlement plans.

The Kinniya district hospital was washed away by the tsunami and medical treatment is currently provided in a tent at Mankerny. The hospital’s District Medical Officer told the WSWs: “It is difficult to run a hospital in a tent for a long period. Now the Italian government is going to rebuild the hospital. We lost two of our nursing staff and one medical officer. There were six medical officers before the tsunami and that was not sufficient.”

At Vellor and Nelaveli in the Kuchchveli division, frustrations boiled over into protests in early February when tsunami survivors blocked the road with damaged boats and demanded government assistance. Selavaratnam, 47, a fish vendor, told us: “We protested twice. The police and army came and promised to remedy the situation, but nothing happened. No one came from the fisheries ministry. If we go to a bank to try to get a loan, we are asked hundreds of questions. How could we give them documents when we have lost everything?”



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