

# Suicides highlight desperate conditions facing Sri Lankan farmers

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A spate of suicides in March and April in poor rural areas has drawn attention to the terrible social conditions and economic difficulties confronting farmers in many parts of Sri Lanka. Three farmers and a farmer's wife killed themselves in the Polonnaruwa district in north central province, all by swallowing pesticide.

W. Haramanis, 80, from the village of Buddhayaya, and Thilakasiri Kularatna, 34, from Welikanda village committed suicide on March 6 and April 16 respectively, in both cases because they were unable to make payments on their loans. On April 16, K.K. Jayaratna, 49, from Rideepokuna village took his life because he was unable to redeem his paddy land, mortgaged 18 years ago.

In another tragic incident, U.A. Dileeka Madumali from Medirigiriya committed suicide on April 12 after an argument with her husband over their financial difficulties. Unable to sell their crop at a decent price, the couple could not purchase a plot of land, as planned, and were unable to afford to buy cloth and other items for an upcoming religious festival.

A.R.M. Wijayarathna, 37, from Galamuna village also attempted to take his life, but fortunately he was revived. He was distraught over his debts that had swelled to 138,200 rupees (\$US1,380)—a huge burden for a poor farmer.

Concerned over the political impact of the deaths, the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government attempted to obscure the reasons for the suicides. Agriculture Minister Anura Kumara Disanayake told a press conference on April 22 that it was "untrue to state" these farmers had committed suicide because they were unable to sell their paddy.

"It is only a ghost that is seen by the [opposition] United National Party," Disanayake declared. The farmers took their lives due to their "personal problems," he insisted, but failed to elaborate further. Disanayake is a member of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a party that has previously appealed to the rural poor on the basis of Sinhala chauvinism and populist promises. In government for the first time, the JVP is confronting growing popular hostility, including among its social base in rural areas.

M.K. Jayatissa, co-secretary of the Progressive Peasant Federation (PPF), immediately condemned Disanayake's statement as "criminal". He also criticised the local JVP MP, S.K. Subasinghe, for failing to saying anything and explained: "Indebtedness, poverty and no facilities to sell their harvest for a suitable price are main problems they [farmers] are facing."

Most farmers in the Polonnaruwa district were unable to grow a

crop during last year's Yala season from May to August because of a serious drought. During the Maha season from November to April, there was a good harvest but farmers were unable to sell their rice for a decent price. "They have no money, not only to cultivate, but even to feed their families," Jayatissa explained.

Poverty, unemployment and underemployment are widespread. In rural areas, 24.7 percent of the population is living below poverty level, if it is taken as being less than \$1 a day. If, however, \$2 a day is taken as the benchmark, the poverty rate in some rural districts is over 50 percent. More than two thirds of people in rural provinces have no access to electricity and half have no access to safe water or hygienic toilet facilities.

These terrible conditions create enormous social pressures that find their tragic expression in the continuing cases of suicide. According to Sri Lankan health ministry figures, the suicide rate is higher in rural areas. The overall suicide rate per 100,000 population in paddy rice growing districts was: 34.33 in 2000; 34.83 in 2001; 31.41 in 2002, 29.04 in 2003 and 35.91 in 2004.

Farmer organisations are demanding the annulment of all state bank loans from 1994; the postponement of auctions to sell off pawned jewelry; the cancellation of interest on mortgage loans and a system for paying them off in installments; an increase in the guaranteed price for paddy rice to match production costs; and the establishment of permanent government centres to buy the rice crop.

Currently, the government guaranteed price for a kilo of paddy rice is 15 to 16 rupees (15 to 16 US cents), but many farmers do not receive this. While harvesting in the recent Maha season began in late February, the government did not begin to buy the crop until the end of March.

When protests erupted, the government announced with great fanfare that it would buy the harvest but allocated only 750 million rupees (\$US7.5 million). The sum was only enough to purchase about 10 percent of the estimated rice production for the season of 2.2 million tonnes.

In the Polonnaruwa district alone, the harvest was estimated at 215,000 metric tonnes. According to the Agriculture Ministry, however, government purchasing centres had only bought 20,000 tonnes by May 9. Not enough purchasing centres were established and the existing facilities were inadequate—lacking scales, bags and proper moisture measuring meters as well as storage facilities and transport.

Moisture content is a significant point of dispute. If the moisture

level of the rice exceeds 14 percent, the government centres will not buy it. Farmers, however, have complained most of the moisture measuring meters did not work properly.

If farmers cannot sell their crops at government purchasing centres, they are compelled to sell at a lower price—10 to 11 rupees a kilogram—to unscrupulous private businessmen and mill owners. Some of the major rice buyers are connected to the country's two major parties—the UNP and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the main component of the ruling UPFA.

Farmers are in a precarious financial position. They are compelled to spend 50,000 rupees per hectare to plant their crop and then have to wait six months to harvest and sell it. If they can sell to the government, their income ranges between 80,000 to 90,000 rupees a hectare. Their income for six months' work is thus about 30,000 rupees or just 6,000 rupees a month per hectare.

Most poor farmers have only one hectare of land or less. In many cases, as a family has expanded, the land has been progressively subdivided among its members. Moreover, poor farmers are compelled to buy seed, chemicals, fertiliser, and other inputs on credit at extortionate rates of up to 20 percent per month. Without good prices for their crops, farmers are caught in a financial trap—owing more and more money, even for basic essentials such as food and clothes.

To get a loan, farmers have to pawn the family's jewelry and household goods, including TVs, bicycles, sewing machines and even agricultural implements. One farmer told the WWS that an agricultural chemical dealer in the Hingurakgoda area had about 600 small tractors and tractor rotaries, all of which had been pawned to obtain immediate finance.

From the late 1950s up to the mid-1970s, successive governments promoted the expansion of rice production as an element of their economic policy of "national self-sufficiency". One of the main objectives was to reduce trade imbalances by cutting rice imports.

Thousands of landless rural families from the southern wet zone and the central hill districts were settled in dry zones in north-central and north-east provinces. They were provided with land, houses and basic agricultural tools as well as subsidised fertiliser, bank loans and food provisions until their first harvest. The assistance was limited and the settlers still faced enormous difficulties.

However, faced with a sharp economic crisis in the mid-1970s, the UNP government turned to "open market policies" in late 1977 and, at the behest of the World Bank and IMF, began dismantling the previous regime of national economic regulation. The increasingly unfettered operation of the market has had a devastating impact on poor farmers.

Devaluation and the opening up of the Sri Lankan economy have sent prices skyrocketing, not only for basic essentials but also for agricultural inputs and equipment. In the 1980s, the UNP government started to cut back on fertiliser subsidies. A water tax was also introduced. Government bodies set up to assist farmers have either been downgraded or abolished.

Among the hardest hit were rural youth who had no prospects in their towns and villages. Many migrated to the cities to find work in the free trade zones established to exploit the country's cheap

labour. Others were compelled to join the military, which expanded massively after the UNP government launched its war in 1983 to crush the Liberation Tigers Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her People Alliance (PA) won office in 1994 promising to end the war, restore democratic rights and improve living standards, particularly for the rural masses. But the PA's limited steps to alleviate rural debt quickly gave way to further free market policies. In 1996, the PA government abolished the Paddy Marketing Board established in 1972 to purchase paddy rice. Government-owned rice mills were also systematically closed.

The UNP-led coalition that came to power in 2002 and the present UPFA have continued the same pattern. During the elections, each has denounced the government of the day and promised to alleviate rural poverty only to abandon its pledges as soon as it won office. Prior to last year's election, the JVP was particularly vocal in its attacks on the UNP for cutting fertiliser subsidies and ignoring the problems of farmers.

But the JVP, which now holds several rural-related ministries in the UPFA government, has pursued policies that are little different from those of the UNP. On taking office, the UPFA government restored the urea fertiliser subsidy, but has raised prices for other fertilisers. The price of a bag of diammonium phosphate, for instance, has increased from 1,050 to 1,550 rupees and for potash from 1,025 to 1,525 rupees.

Most farmers' organisations are affiliated with one or other of the political parties. Those that claim to be independent limit themselves to putting pressure on the government of the day. Two decades of relentless economic "reforms" demonstrate, however, that none of the major parties have any solution to the mounting crisis in rural areas. Far from bowing to pressure from farmers, successive governments have imposed the dictates of international finance capital. The latest suicides are just one of the terrible consequences.



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