

Protests erupt in tsunami-devastated areas of Sri Lanka

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Six months after the December 26 tsunami hit Sri Lanka, more than a million people in coastal areas around much of the island are still living in temporary shelters, refugee camps or with relatives and face an uncertain future. Much of the promised assistance has failed to materialise and reconstruction has barely begun.

The government's arbitrary imposition of a rebuilding ban near the coastline has compounded the difficulties confronting many families, particularly fishermen, trying to put their lives back together. While the victims are restricted from constructing homes on previous sites, they have been offered no alternatives.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team visited the area south of Colombo last week where there have been a series of protests this month over the government's failure to provide assistance to the victims of the tsunami. In the coastal strip immediately south of Ambalangoda, hundreds of people have blocked the main road with crude barricades and clashed with police and riot squads.

We witnessed the third protest march on the morning of June 17. More than 200 men, women and children had reached Seenigama after marching from Telwatta, another coastal village around three kilometres away. The villages of Telwatta, Paraliya, Seenigama and Varallana were badly affected by the tsunami. The protesters gathered in the grounds of an ancient shrine.

A spokesperson told us: "We came here to register our protest by ritually smashing coconuts at the portal of the shrine to curse the insensitive authorities who have left us destitute for over six months. They stopped the monthly grants after two months and are now getting ready to stop our rations. It will cut our sole remaining lifeline after the disaster struck us totally without warning."

Hundreds of police had been mobilised from 11 stations and were lined up like soldiers preparing for a major battle. Every 500 metres or so along the main road and the railway line, which run parallel along the coast, there were squads of riot police and groups of police. At Seenigama, police officials warned the protesters against blocking any roads.

Nevertheless, a pitched battle erupted in the evening. Hundreds of angry protesters gathered at the Urawatta bridge and blocked the main Colombo-Galle road with a makeshift barricade of rocks, logs and tsunami debris. When police moved in to remove them, demonstrators attempted to beat them off by throwing stones. Those in the forefront of the protest were mainly women.

Other demonstrations have taken place in the same areas. On June 12, some 2,000 people from four coastal villages between Ambalangoda and Galle—Paraliya, Totagamuwa, Akurala and Seenigama—used a bus to block the Colombo-Galle highway for hours. Again there was a violent clash as police attacked the protesters with batons and rifle butts. Four people were arrested.

The following evening, hundreds of people again blocked the road to demand the immediate release of those arrested. The police were compelled to back down and free the prisoners. After police officials promised to look into the problems, the protests subsided. The protest we witnessed flared up because nothing had been done.

The demonstrators were demanding plots of land and houses in suitable areas for the people who lived within 100 metres of the sea—now subject to a rebuilding ban. They wanted their legal rights to the previous land to be preserved as well as the 2.5 million rupees (\$US2,500) compensation promised by the government. They were also calling for basic essentials—provisions, a promised monthly allowance of 5,000 rupees and water, electricity and toilets for their temporary accommodation.

These protests provide just a glimpse of what is taking place in coastal areas in the north, east and south of the island. The villages south of Ambalangoda are part of the administrative district surrounding the southern provincial capital of Galle. Officially, 4,141 lost their lives in this area alone and another 23,053 families or 120,000 were displaced. The actual figure could be higher. The waves swept inland causing destruction up to two kilometres from the coast. At Paraliya, an entire train was washed off the tracks, killing an estimated 2,000 passengers.

The response of the government and police to the latest protests has been to crack down on demonstrations. According to the *Daily Mirror* on June 20, the southern deputy inspector general of police W. Prathapasinghe has banned all demonstrations and processions along the southern coastal belt from Bentota to Tangalla. When contacted by the WSWs, Prathasinghe was defensive, claiming he had only warned people “not to demonstrate and take part in processions on the highways”.

There is no doubt, however, how the police will respond to future demonstrations. Young people, who we spoke to, were reluctant to have their photographs taken for fear of police harassment. They told us that police had warned they would be arrested for taking part in protests.

The government is desperately seeking to suppress the issues raised by the tsunami. Tilak Ranaviraja, head of the Task Force for Relief (TAFOR), told the *Sunday Times* on June 5: “I had a meeting with foreign and local NGO (non-government organisation) officials to discuss the housing program. They expressed satisfaction on the progress of work.”

Ranaviraja had to admit, however, that “it is true there are people in camps and tents”. But he blamed the victims, saying that many people had a house but refused to leave the refugee camps because they wanted to get relief supplies. The real situation is the opposite. Thousands of people are suffering in camps without even basic facilities because they have no alternative.

Ranaviraja told the newspaper that each temporary house was at least 400 square feet (37 square metres) in size. In fact, most are little more than one-room huts roughly built with wooden planks and a thin aluminium-sheeting roof. Most are less than 200 square feet and in the Seenigama and Paraliya areas are less than 120 square feet. They lack kitchens, toilets, electricity, water or any basic furniture. They leak when it rains and are unbearably hot on sunny days.

Many tsunami victims are angry that aid money appears to be going to politicians, their relatives and friends, rather than those who need it. “The government authorities say the cost of a single house is 500,000 rupees, but they are not worth more than 200,000. Politicians and businessmen are filling their pockets through construction contracts,” they told us.

Chitra, a mother of three children from Telwatta, now lives with her sister. Her husband is a bus conductor and she sells vegetables to supplement the family income. She explained that the family had been given 15 sheets of galvanised iron to build a house. “How can a decent family live in such a dwelling with children?” she asked.

Chitra angrily explained that no one from any of the main political parties—the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP),

United National Party (UNP) or Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—had visited them or asked about their problems. In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, politicians made a great fanfare of their visits and promises. Now they do not bother.

B. Indika Ruwan from Paraliya said: “I am an electronic technician. I lost my workshop and working instruments. The government promised to provide self-employees like me with the necessary instruments and tools and also to provide assistance with bank loans, electricity bills and pawned jewelry. But all those promises were just for media propaganda.”

A. Gamini, a father of two children and retired from the navy, said: “The government promised to provide houses with facilities. Now they are going to push us into poultry cages.” Ratu Misilin Nona, an 82-year-old woman still living at a temple as a refugee, said she was concerned about news that the government was planning to stop food rations.

We spoke to a group of young people, all unemployed, who were very angry at the government. Expressing his disgust, one youth said: “As the tsunami destroyed our fishing boats and equipment, we cannot go fishing. The government promised to provide boats but only two have been given for the entire area. We are terribly disappointed.”

An official from the Paraliya Development Foundation, a volunteer organisation, explained that they had invited government politicians in early June to come and discuss the problems of the people in the areas, but were ignored. Then they invited the opposition UNP, whose representatives came, made promises and did nothing.

The callous indifference of the government and opposition parties alike to the plight of tens of thousands of people throughout the island is an indictment of the entire political establishment.



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