

On-the-spot report

Thousands lack aid in tsunami-affected areas of Sri Lanka

Ivan Weerasekera, W.A. Sunil
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Six months after the December 26 tsunami, the political establishment in Colombo is preoccupied with a bitter dispute over the establishment of a joint body with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to dispense relief aid and begin reconstruction. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) broke from the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) on June 16 over the issue and joined with other Sinhala chauvinist parties in denouncing the body as a betrayal of the nation.

Following months of vacillation, President Chandrika Kumaratunga last week finally signed an agreement with the LTTE to facilitate the inflow of \$3 billion in foreign aid. While the government desperately needed the money, Kumaratunga hesitated out of concern over the impact of the Sinhala communalist campaign within her own party. The opposition United National Party (UNP) supported the aid body, but “with reservations” aimed at conciliating the JVP and other Sinhala extremist groups.

In the midst of this reactionary campaign, tens of thousands of tsunami victims—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—are without adequate assistance, surviving as best they can in temporary accommodation or with relatives. Many have lost their livelihoods and have no immediate future prospects. Relief aid has dried up or is sporadic and the so-called reconstruction effort has barely begun.

The response of ordinary people following the tsunami was an outpouring of sympathy and assistance to the victims regardless of their religion, language or ethnic background. Last month our reporting team still found little evidence of any popular support for the protracted communal campaign in the southern towns of Matara and Hambantota—both of which were badly hit by the tsunami. The vast majority of people were worried about their own futures and deeply frustrated at the lack of government assistance.

One man from Polhena near Matara was concerned about the lack of aid in the area and suspicious about the joint aid mechanism with the LTTE. But his anger was directed more

at the main political parties, including the JVP, than at the Tamil minority. “How can we believe that the joint mechanism will provide help for the Tamil people of the north and east, when it is denied to us in the south?” he asked.

Others had hopes that the joint aid body might be “a bridge for peace building,” as one welfare coordinator told us at the Dharma Kabir mosque in Hambantota. He was obviously a supporter of the ruling UPFA as he tried to tell us that people in the area had facilities and the government was working to improve their conditions. The overwhelming sentiment of most people was deep scepticism in the government and opposition parties.

Superficially Hambantota and Matara appear to have returned to normal. The debris left by the tsunami has been removed. Infrastructure such as electricity, communications and transport are functioning to an extent. But the same cannot be said for the lives of many people in the area.

More than 400 families are still living packed in temporary houses and in tents surrounding the Hambantota urban area. We visited just one area—the Hambantota Urban Council ground—where 383 men, women and children from 104 families were crowded in. Some have small temporary houses while others are waiting for houses to be built for them.

These small huts—just 20 square metres in size—are built of wooden planks and thin aluminum roofing. In some cases, they were divided in two by a wooden plank wall. All of them are crowded together with no more than a few feet between houses.

For nearly 400 people there are only 32 toilets. “They frequently overflow creating trouble for us,” one resident complained. “Also there is not enough water. The water tank can only be filled at night as there is not enough water from the main line. The tank is empty by around noon.”

Prior to the tsunami, these residents were involved in fishing, tourism, carpentry, tailoring and various other small

businesses such as selling vegetables and fruit. After the disaster, most have little or no income and have to rely on government rations.

A carpenter told us: “I lost my house and tools. A non-government organisation provided me with some hand tools. But I used to work with power tools. So it is difficult. I have five children and three of them are still at school. We don’t know if the ration will be extended after the end of this month [June]. I can’t think how we can manage in this situation.”

A mother said she was concerned about her children. “They are frustrated because of the situation they face. Young ones, especially teenagers, loiter here and there most of the day. Their interest in education is almost completely gone. Children play on the dusty ground because they have no facilities,” she said, pointing out a group of children to us.

At a camp controlled by Dharma Kabir mosque, there are 196 families. The accommodation is next to the cemetery and the conditions are appalling. “You see we are living with the dead,” some said. “We have to share two toilets for 15 families.” One common kitchen, two showers and a washbasin have to be shared between 15 or 17 families. Water has to be fetched from the common kitchens which were crowded with flies.

All of the families are Muslim and the lack of privacy creates cultural problems. “We, Muslim women need more privacy,” one woman said. “My son is 13 years old. So I can’t change my clothes in his presence. My daughter, 12, faces the same problem. How long will we have to live in this way?”

Nearly 100 families are living in tents on the sides of the main Colombo-Hambantota road in an area known as UC quarters. More than 800 houses were swept away and the government has banned reconstruction in the area. But the people—many of them fishing families—are reluctant to move to Sribopura, three kilometres away, because of the difficulties in finding any employment.

“The government treats us as criminals. Not only do the authorities not provide any facilities for us, but they block others like the NGOs and charity organisations from giving us anything,” N.M.M. Riwan, secretary of the Welfare Association of the Displaced, said.

Explaining their refusal to move to Sribopura, people pointed to the lack of basic facilities. Some 45 houses have been built but there is no water supply, electricity and not enough transport facilities.

As elsewhere, people are hostile toward politicians. “The government and opposition parties have no concern for us. We’ve been abandoned. Initially, and still now and then, some politicians come along. But they come for their own

political purposes. They come, give us something and stand in front of TV cameras to get political publicity,” one young person declared.

At the Gamunu refugee camp near Matara, 39 families are living in three school buildings. The school students have been transferred to another school in the area. Each of the schoolrooms are divided up using wooden seats. Each family has about 10 square metres. There are only 8 toilets, 8 water taps, and 8 showers for 39 families. Two of the toilets are unuseable because they are overflowing.

There are no kitchens so cooking is done inside the rooms using kerosene oil cookers despite the dangers and health risks. “We prepare only one meal for breakfast and lunch—mostly rice and two curries, one vegetable and one dry fish. Fish and meat prices have gone up, so we can’t afford to buy it,” one woman explained. “This is a miserable life. How long we have to tolerate this?” She said they expected to stay for another six months.

At Polhena, one of the worst hit areas near Matara, some people—those living beyond the government’s arbitrary 100-metre limit—are receiving some assistance from a Hungarian-based NGO. But those living within the exclusion zone face great difficulties. Most were engaged in fishing and the tourist industry and have lost their source of income. About 100 families are presently living in temporary huts without any basic facilities.

One tsunami victim told us: “We have no permanent income. We live on whatever we can earn day-to-day. Even before the disaster, we lived in a small hut but we could earn a little money when tourists came. The government has not helped us. Even this hut was provided by a Buddhist monk. Now the government is trying to drive us away. How are we going to survive?”

Far from providing any assistance, the government is cracking down on protests by angry tsunami victims. The police have imposed a ban on demonstrations on a broad stretch of the southern coastline from Bentota to Tangalla and have clashed violently with protestors on several occasions. The resort to communalism is a desperate attempt by the ruling elite to divert the mounting anger and frustration and to set working people against each other.



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