

On-the-spot report

Lack of aid for tsunami victims on Sri Lanka's east coast

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A *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) reporting team recently visited Ampara, a district in the east of Sri Lanka that was among the areas worst affected by the December 26 tsunami. Six months after the disaster struck, some of the better off victims have been able to put their lives back together. Many of the poor, however, are still struggling to cope with surviving day to day.

According to official statistics from the Ampara district secretariat, only five refuge camps containing 3,450 people and 100 temporary housing schemes with 37,321 refugees now operating in the district. When we visited Ampara at the beginning of the year around 80,000 people were living in the refuge camps and about 166,000 had been affected by the tsunami.

Government officials could not explain what had happened to the tens of thousands who have left the refugee camps since January. They simply said that the former refugees must be living with relatives or have returned to their homes—even though many were damaged.

All the refuge camps in Ampara town—the main city in the district—as well as in the schools and other public buildings and land in the immediate coastal area have been cleared out. But the living conditions of the tsunami victims have not greatly improved. They have been shifted to temporary shelters and are living in cramped rooms with poor facilities along the coastline.

As in the south of Sri Lanka, the victims have not received any substantial government assistance and reconstruction has hardly begun. The government's promise to provide 5,000 rupees (\$US50) a month for each affected family only materialised twice. A bank officer with the Peoples Bank—the state-owned bank in charge of distributing the aid—told us that the Treasury had only allocated enough funds for two months.

Similarly, the government pledge to provide individual grants of 250,000 rupees (\$US2,500) to rebuild houses completely destroyed by the tsunami has suffered from a lack of funds. In the Akkaraipattu divisional secretariat area for instance, as of July 8 grants have been paid for only 110 of the 428 houses that were assessed as “completely damaged”.

After months of political controversy in Colombo, President Chandrika Kumaratunga finally agreed to establish a joint mechanism for aid and reconstruction with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS) was signed on June 24, but divisional secretaries have no instructions as to how it should be implemented.

At the Alayadivembu divisional secretary office, several employees openly expressed their scepticism. “It took six months to sign the agreement,” one said. “So it will take another six months to evolve some kind of organisational structure.” Another pointed out that the agreement had done nothing to reduce tensions. “Even on the day after the government signed the agreement, the LTTE Ampara area political leader Kuilinpan was attacked by an armed group,” he said.

Ampara has a significant Muslim population and has long been a focus of political agitation by various Muslim organisations and parties. Divisional secretariats in the district have been divided along communal lines—Tamil and Muslim—as have schools. These divisions have benefitted a tiny stratum of Muslim bureaucrats, landowners and businessmen. Most Muslims, like most local Tamils, are poor peasants, fishermen or agricultural labourers.

Significantly, many of the Muslim tsunami victims were disgusted with the lack of aid and political support from the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and the Muslim-

based National Unity Alliance (NUA).

On June 27, Muslim organisations called a hartal (strike and business shutdown) to protest against the lack of Muslim representation in the P-TOMS bodies. SLMC leader Rauf Hakim demanded that his organisation be a formal signatory to the agreement. However, there was no deep-going support for the protest. On the day, shops shut in the morning but there were no protests, rallies or marches.

Indeed, the SLMC received support from unexpected quarters—the Special Task Force (STF) or police commandos who are notorious for their repressive methods and racist attitudes. One farmer told us that STF police went around Akkaraipattu town telling shopkeepers in Muslim areas to close up for the morning. Sections of the police and military are supportive of Sinhala chauvinist organisations, which campaigned against the P-TOMS agreement as a betrayal of the nation.

Among the Muslims affected by the tsunami, very few supported the hartal and its aims. At one refugee camp, several people told us that Muslim organisations should have a greater role in implementing the P-TOMS agreement. Elsewhere everyone opposed the protest and some expressed angry hostility, saying it would sabotage their chances of improved living conditions.

In Akkaraipattu, many criticised Muslim politicians for doing nothing for the tsunami victims over the past six months. According to Ahamed Abdullah at the Al Bathurnagar temporary housing scheme, Muslim politicians wanted to be included in the P-TOMS mechanism to get the commissions and other financial benefits. “They are organising the hartal for their own benefit. If we are given 10,000 rupees, they will take 5,000 and we will get only the remaining 5,000,” he said.

Nainar Mohamed, a small farmer, said: “In this area Tamil and Muslim people have been living together in a friendly fashion. But politicians are dividing Muslims and Tamils. Yesterday some Muslim organisations called a hartal against P-TOMS. Most of the people do not support that and the hartal was not successful. After 12 noon, most shops reopened and the situation returned to normal.”

The condition of schools and hospitals in the districts is appalling. Many are forced to operate in temporary accommodation and the government has no concrete plan for rebuilding.

The arbitrary official ban on constructing any building within 200 metres of the sea has affected these

institutions. Many have nowhere to even begin rebuilding. Teachers at Akkarapattu explained that one higher education ministry official had told them that parents and the school’s “old boys” were responsible for finding suitable land for new buildings.

Mr Amarashinghe, additional secretary of planning in the Education Ministry, defended the lack of action. “It is not correct to say that nothing is being done in the east. The government is doing a lot of work to reconstruct schools,” he told us. But when questioned about details in the Ampara district, he declared: “I can’t say specifically on that. There is a land problem in Akkaraipattu and Kaumunai.” He cut the conversation short and asked us to contact another official.

Bureaucratic apathy and negligence has forced local people to take their own initiatives. In a number of places, including at the Nindavur base hospital, Saindamaradhu district hospital and the Malharus Shans Maha Vidyalyaya in Saindamaradhu, villagers helped to reorganise schools or hospitals independently of the government.

When we visited the Malharus Shans College on July 2, some teachers were conducting additional classes without payment. One teacher was from another school in Marathamunai and was helping students to catch up with their studies. The students were very appreciative. But their contempt for politicians was evident. “Our representative Ferial Ashraff and Al Ha Abdullah did nothing,” one declared.

Public hostility to the government, local politicians and the state bureaucracy is one of the reasons why President Kumaratunga agreed to the P-TOMS deal which gives the LTTE a major role in presiding over reconstruction. To put it bluntly, Colombo needs the assistance of the LTTE to squash what is a rising tide of alienation and resentment in the East.



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