

On-the-spot report

# Sri Lankan schools still not rebuilt after tsunami

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Education is the main path to escape from poverty for young people in the Ampara district, one of the most economically disadvantaged regions in Sri Lanka. The devastation of schools by the December 26 tsunami was a heavy blow to ordinary people, especially to students in this district along Sri Lanka's eastern coast.

According to government figures, 40 schools in the district were damaged by the tidal waves. Of these, 28 were within 200 metres of the sea where President Chandrika Kumaratunga's government has banned any construction and therefore have to be rebuilt elsewhere.

In Akkaraipattu, out of the 23 schools damaged in the zone, reconstruction has commenced in only one. In the Kalmunai educational division, 17 schools were destroyed—15 completely—and 8 have to be relocated. In this zone also, reconstruction has started in just one school.

A WSWs team recently visited a number of schools that were destroyed and are now conducted in temporary facilities. Shams Central College in Maratamunai, established in 1978, was severely affected by the tsunami. Of 1,542 students, 104 were killed. About 1,300 now attend the school.

School vice-principal P.M.M. Bathurdeen said: "This school is at the centre of education in the area. Since 1978 it has produced more than 300 university graduates, including 23 doctors and 50 engineers. Even at last year's university entrance exam, two students were selected to the medical faculty and one to the engineering faculty. Altogether, around 30 students went to university. The school has the best results in the whole region. Its destruction is a big blow to the people."

The school is temporarily conducted at the Masjidul Kabaer mosque. Seven sheds have also been built with tin sheets. Bathurdeen explained: "Because of the dedication of the teachers, old boys (former students) and the parents, we were able to restart the school on January 25. The 20 computers we had were destroyed by the tsunami. Now we don't have any computer lab or a library."

The education ministry told the school administration that it was responsible for finding suitable land to rebuild. A former student, now a resident doctor in the United Kingdom, has

bought a plot for the school.

Situated between the lagoon and the sea, the area is densely populated and poor. Unlike the other parts of Ampara, it is difficult to find land for paddy cultivation. Only 20 percent of people are engaged in farming because the water is not suitable for agriculture. A quarter of the population depends on fishing, another quarter on hand weaving. The rest are in government jobs, such as teachers, clerks, doctors and engineers.

Most of those in the public service received their qualifications because of free education. Bathurdeen's brother, P.S. Nazrudeen, told the WSWs: "My father is a fisherman. But none of his seven boys are doing fishing now. All of us went to the university. I am the only person in the family who couldn't complete my Bachelor of Arts degree. I entered the Colombo university in 1988 but had to leave the campus before finishing the course because of the instability in the country at that time. Now I am working as a nurse at Maratamunai peripheral hospital.

"A brother of mine is a philosophy lecturer in Paradaniya University. Our family is not an exception in the area. In nearly every house there are one or two graduates."

We visited another Muslim school, Malharus Shams Maha Vidyalaya. According to the principal, A.A. Rasool, 98 of the 1,765 students were killed. At present, 1,448 students are continuing their studies but lack basic facilities. The tsunami destroyed the library, and computer and science labs. So far the government has done nothing to remedy the situation. A temporary science lab—if you can call it that—is operating with a few test tubes and some chemicals.

Rasool explained: "We were only able to restart the school in February. Grades 1 to 5 were held in the Sainthamaruthu GMMS School from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m., while grade 6 to university entrance classes were held in another school, Al Hallal, also in the evenings. In GMMS, classes were held regularly. But because there was not enough room at Al Hallal, the classes took place on a rotation basis. Grades 6, 7 and 8 were held one week. The next week these classes had a holiday and the other classes were held.

"We couldn't conduct education properly. So the parents, old

boys and teachers got together and shifted the school to this place, the public ground of the Kalmunai municipal council. There was lots of building rubbish here. A non-government organisation (NGO) cleared it. Another built three temporary sets of classrooms with plywood and tin sheets for the roof. As you can see, we also use a half-built pavilion.

“Still there is not enough room, so the school is conducted for two sessions—evening for grades 1 to 5 and morning for the other classes. One Hungarian NGO came forward to construct school buildings, but because the government has not officially transferred the land to the school, they moved away. When we spoke to the municipal commissioner, he said he didn’t have the necessary legal power and we would have to get it from the Governor of the Northeast Provincial council. The School Development Society wrote to the Governor, but we didn’t even get a reply.”

A student in the university entrance class said: “Our school was destroyed by the tsunami. It is now functioning at the Sainthamaruthu playground temporarily. Because of the lack of room, classes are conducted in two sessions. Before, 45 minutes was allocated for one subject, now we get only 30 minutes. Our books were destroyed but still we haven’t received any new ones. Six months have passed, but the government has done nothing.

“Our (parliamentary) representatives, Ferial Asraff and Abdullah [of the National Unity Alliance (NUA)—a Muslim political party], are also doing nothing. By contrast to the politicians, our teachers are doing a remarkable job, under a lot of hardship and in difficult conditions. Some people oppose their playground being used for a school. Playgrounds can be relocated but schools are very important. The government should immediately build permanent buildings in this place.”

He condemned the chauvinist campaign being waged against the joint mechanism established between the Kumaratunga government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to distribute tsunami aid. “Because of the discrimination against them, Tamil people took arms. During the 20-year war, the country was destroyed. Now the chauvinist Buddhist monks are fasting against the joint mechanism. Are they ready to go to war? We don’t want war and the government must treat everybody on an equal basis.”

A female student in the same class said: “In this temporary building we can’t study because of the disturbances. It is very noisy. The classes are not separated properly. We always hear what the teacher in the class next-door is saying. We don’t have enough toilet facilities, only one temporary water tank. We don’t have a science lab, home science facilities or computer facilities. We want a permanent building, to continue our studies.”

At the Vipulananda Central College in Karathivu, 27 students died in the tsunami. Of the 1,200 students before the disaster, 1,150 are now attending the school. Deputy Principal S Thillaiyampalam told us: “We are functioning temporarily in

the RKM Girls School with the help of canvas tents provided by UNICEF [United Nations Children’s Fund]. But because there is not enough space, the school is conducted in two sessions. Classes from grades 10 to 13 are held in the morning from 8 to 12.30, and grades 6 to 9 in the evening from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m.

“The Italian embassy said it will provide 120 million rupees for a school building, but we must find five acres of land. The market price is 3.5 million rupees [\$US35,000], but the government is not ready to give us this money. We also asked several NGOs, but nobody has helped us. So we have decided to build the school on the former site, which is just outside the 200-metre buffer zone. If we go there the student attendance will be low. The teachers are not happy about it. But we don’t have any other alternative.”

He explained the problems faced by teachers, 13 of whom had their houses demolished by the tsunami, losing all their belongings. “The government promised to give them one year’s salary as an interest-free loan, but they still haven’t received it. How can they rebuild their houses with only their monthly salary? These teachers are staying with their relatives. In these difficult conditions, how can they teach properly?”

A grade 7 student said: “It is difficult to study in the evening school. The school closes at 5 p.m., so we are late getting home. How can we concentrate our studies? We don’t have proper water or toilet facilities.” Other students complained about the lack of tables and chairs. The science lab, computer room and library were destroyed, and the government is yet to replace them.

Another school, Al Bathur Vidyalaya in Akkaraipattu, is currently located in the Bathur Nagar mosque. With UNICEF providing tents and books, the school is functioning under very difficult conditions. The temporary water tank was empty when we visited the school and teachers said they had not had water for three days. The mosque administration has asked them to move out within a month, but teachers said they had nowhere to go. The former school, just 100 metres from the sea, was completely destroyed.

The future of the 108 students seems very bleak. One teacher said: “We need 40 million rupees for the buildings and another 2.8 million rupees for the land. One higher official in the education ministry said the government doesn’t have the money and that it is the responsibility of the teachers, parents and old boys to find suitable land for the school. Then the ministry can coordinate with an NGO to fund the buildings. We are not rich. How can we find the money for it?”



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