Clinton paints false picture of “progress” for Sri Lanka’s tsunami victims

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During a visit to Sri Lanka yesterday, former US President Bill Clinton praised the government for making “real progress” in assisting the victims of the December 26 tsunami. “Ninety percent of children are back in school, epidemics have been prevented and transitional shelter has been provided to almost all internally displaced people,” he declared.

Clinton’s rosy picture is a long way from the grim reality facing thousands of survivors, many of whom lost everything in the disaster—homes, possessions, livelihoods and family members. Nearly a year after the tragedy, many victims still live in intolerable conditions because the government and international donors have failed to provide assistance to meet their basic needs.

After Indonesia, Sri Lanka was the country worst affected by the tsunami. The death toll was 40,000 people and nearly one million people were displaced. More than 50,000 families are still living in often-poor quality, temporary accommodation and a similar number are with relatives or friends.

According to Task Force for Rehabilitation of the Nation (TAFREN) figures released for October, 80,000 houses were completely destroyed by the huge waves and another 40,000 were partly destroyed. An estimated 400,000 people needed to be resettled. More than 275,000 people lost their means of support—many of them fishermen. Nine fishing harbours, 15,300 fishing boats and one million fishing nets were destroyed.

Some 182 schools and 72 hospitals were damaged along with 363 other facilities, including mental health and childcare clinics and central dispensaries. The estimated cost for the relocation and reconstruction of health and education services alone is $US269 million. Total damage is conservatively put at $1 billion and reconstruction costs at $1.5 billion.

Despite the pledges of government aid and international assistance, reconstruction has barely begun. Auditor General S.C. Mayadunne issued a report recently, criticising the government for using only 13 percent of funds received for tsunami rehabilitation. As of the end of July, only 1,055 permanent houses had been built.

Attempting to counter the criticism, Treasury Secretary P. B. Jayasundara issued a statement in late October declaring that 3,200 permanent houses had been built—out of the 80,000 projected. However, another set of statistics from TAFREN put the number of houses actually handed over to tsunami victims at just 868 by the end of October.

Whatever the actual figure, there is a glaring discrepancy between what has been constructed and the needs of tens of thousands of people without proper accommodation.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team went to affected areas south of Colombo on Sunday. Travelling towards the southern city of Galle, one can see plenty of evidence of the lack of any reconstruction. As well as the ruins of homes and buildings, there are makeshift temporary shelters with discoloured walls covered by misshapen and loose roofing sheets scattered everywhere.

Twenty kilometres from Galle, 44 families are living in the village of Godagama in temporary shacks built by non-governmental organisations. A crowd of men, women and young people quickly gathered.

Dayananda, a retired worker from a ceramic factory, told the WSWS: “We were waiting for this type of international media to tell our real story to the world. The government, the bureaucracy and the media have shoved us behind a curtain. No one can see us. We are living in a hell. We feel like helpless human beings without home and livelihood. Once we worked and earned a livelihood. But now we are forced to wait for aid from someone.”

Piyasena interrupted, saying housing was the main problem. “Come inside and see how my family, wife and the five children, live together in this 12 x 10 foot area. Because of the [recent] heavy rains, my kids frequently

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suffer from colds and coughs. Every night we send our children to the house of a relative half a kilometre away." If the government helped with housing, he said, people could look for work.

Dayananda added that he had thought former president Chandrika Kumaratunga would help. People in Godagama had supported her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—but to no avail. "We voted for Mahinda Rajapakse in the recent presidential election. We are waiting to see how he is going to solve the problems. He promised to complete tsunami housing schemes within six months. We will give him those six months. If he fails we will sleep on the highway until we die. No one can stop us doing that."

Asked about the failure of the US, Pakistan and Indian governments to adequately assist the victims of Hurricane Katrina and the Kashmir earthquake, Dayananda's wife said: "Poor people all over the world have to face the same treatment from their governments. It would be good if we could mobilise the poor all over the world who confront the same problems."

Dayananda said it was the same with the treatment of workers by big companies. He worked 27 years in the nearby factory of Meetiyagoda Ceramics Ltd. Workers were paid an annual bonus to push them to work hard. After the tsunami, they received no help from the company. "They exploited us and threw us away," he said. "The government's bureaucratic system is also working against us. How many papers have we had to fill out? How many times have we gone to government offices and been turned away without anything?"

Immediately after the tsunami, the government used coastal conservation laws to prevent people rebuilding in a buffer zone of 100 metres from the shoreline. In the northern and eastern provinces, it was 200 metres. An estimated 56,000 houses were destroyed—totally or partly—in these zones. As they have watched tourist hotels being rebuilt within these zones, people have become more and more angry—so much so that Rajapakse had to promise to overturn the decision.

One of those affected by the ban, Wasanthi, a widow with three children, said: "The government acquired land for us and made a big noise about starting a housing scheme. According to a plaque, 1,500 houses are to be built. But only 10 houses have been constructed and handed over up to now. When we consider how long construction is going take, one can guess what will happen to Mahinda Rajapakse's promise to build houses for all tsunami-affected people in six months."

No one has much faith in the pledges made during the November 17 presidential election campaign. Both Rajapakse and his United National Party rival Ranil Wickremesinghe engaged in a meaningless bidding war of empty promises.

The issue of aid has become embroiled in communal politics. Rajapakse allied himself with the Sinhala Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which demanded that he renounce plans for a temporary joint body with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the administration of tsunami relief. According to the JVP, the Post Tsunami Operation Managerial Structure (P-TOMS) agreement is an impermissible concession that is tantamount to the betrayal of the Sinhala nation.

Even the limited government aid has been distributed on an openly political basis. According to TAFREN's countrywide statistics, 721 of the 868 permanent houses built and given to tsunami victims have been in Hambantota, Rajapakse's electoral district. No houses have been completed and handed over in the districts of Amparai, Batticaloa, Kilinochchi, Mullaithivu and Trincomalee, where many Tamils and Muslims live.

International donors have been using the promise of tsunami aid to push their own agenda. The US and other major powers had hoped that the P-TOMS agreement would pave the way for restarting talks between the LTTE and the Colombo government to end the country's civil war. Washington is concerned to end the conflict that threatens its burgeoning economic and strategic interests in the Indian subcontinent.

According to Treasury Secretary Jayasundara, although donor countries pledged $3.4 billion in aid, only $2.7 billion has been transformed into "firm commitments." Most of this financial assistance is tied to the resumption of the "peace process". Clinton used his visit to reinforce the message, declaring that while "real progress" had been made, the work could be "reversed" if the current ceasefire broke down.

Clinton's hollow words about "progress" simply underscores the utter cynicism of bourgeois politicians in Sri Lanka and internationally. The last consideration of any of them is the plight of tens of thousands of destitute tsunami victims, who, 11 months on, still confront a bleak future.

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