

More rural suicides in Sri Lanka

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21 November 2005

Four tragic suicides by farmers in the north-central province of Sri Lanka during the lead-up to the presidential election have highlighted the plight of many small farmers, who face mounting debt, rising costs and insecure incomes. Despite efforts by the candidates of the two major parties to win rural votes with various promises, hostility towards them on the part of the rural poor is growing.

Three of the four suicides took place in September; the last one in early November. All but one of the four lived in remote villages on the edge of the northern war zones, which have been ravaged by two decades of civil war. Many farmers are poor Sinhalese settlers who have been used as a buffer by the military during its fighting against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). They live in some of the most impoverished areas in the country.

* M.P. Jayasinghe, 44, from Aralaganvila took his life on September 24. He was burdened with a 90,000 rupee loan (\$US900) and could not redeem his one hectare paddy field, which had been mortgaged to a private money lender during the last two planting seasons. His wife Nalini Malkanthi told the WWS that he had been in mental agony over his impossible financial situation. Jayasinghe had become a sharecropper on his own land, she explained angrily. He cultivated the land, but a big share of the crop went to the money lender. She is now living with her parents, who are in their 80s.

* D.H. Sunil Rajapakse, 38, from the village of Boaththa at Welikanda, was a father of two who took his life on September 27. His wife Kanthi Thilaka Abeysinghe told the WWS that her husband was heavily indebted. For this year's Yala season, beginning in May with the harvest in July-August, Rajapakse was only able to borrow 30,000 rupees from a state bank and had to turn to a private money lender for another 15,000 rupees. His crop, which was badly damaged by flooding, brought in only 65,000 rupees. He received no government assistance and was 47,000 rupees in debt to the bank, the money lenders and local shops.

His wife explained: "How can we settle these loans, he would ask me sadly. He was worrying for days while the money lenders came to the house to demand payment. He felt ashamed. He bought some poison by selling the last paddy bag he had stored for home consumption and took his life. If the government had bought the paddy [rice] for at least the guaranteed price, my husband would not have taken his life. Now our situation is worse. We are only surviving because our neighbours are giving us something to live on.

"The burden of sending children to school is high. I had to spend about 2,000 rupees to buy things to send my son to school. There are further costs. The schools don't even have the minimum

resources necessary, so some students are not able to go to school regularly. Although there are about 800 students at the Aselapura school at Welikanda, there are only 20 teachers.

"At night, wild elephants roam this area. The LTTE also comes to the village. In 1995, they killed scores of people here. The military has advised us to gather in the village temple if such problems arise. We spend our lives in fear. No one looks after us. However, they [the politicians] might come to see us now because the elections are near," she said in disgust.

* JM Saman Kumara, 24, from Nagastenna village in Welikanda, killed himself on September 29. He had left school after grade 10 to start working on the land to support his family. He cultivated another farmer's land, promising him 1,100 kilograms of the harvest. His loans had piled up to 55,000 rupees, but he earned only 19,980 rupees from the harvest. He was compelled to sell his rice at 11 rupees per kilogram to a private trader so he was unable to pay off the landowner or his loans.

His father explained that Kumara cultivated his own land of one hectare with a loan of 15,000 rupees from a rural bank. But he did not receive water from the government irrigation scheme in time, the paddy field dried out and he could not get a good harvest.

"When we were brought to this place in 1993 it was a jungle. We were given one hectare. The villages were settled with Sinhalese by pushing out Tamils. Earlier we were given military protection but later that was withdrawn. At the checkpoints there were police in the daytime and the LTTE at night. We could not go out at night even for an emergency. The Premadasa government brought us here. It has been a disaster for us."

* The latest death in early November was at Lankapura, Kalingupura in Medirigiriya. Little is known so far about the circumstances but the story is almost certainly similar. Bodidasa, 74, committed suicide by drinking pesticides after failing to pay back a 24,000 rupee loan.

These suicides are just the latest in the ongoing toll being imposed on Sri Lanka's impoverished farmers. The last spate of deaths took place in March and April this year—that is, immediately after the harvest for the Maha season. The reasons were undoubtedly the same—people driven to the extremes of desperation by a financial crisis for which there was no solution.

Even in the best of times, farmers in these areas face grinding poverty. Their homes are built of wattle and daub. Because it is a war zone, many of the paddy fields are not in use. Frequently there are signs warning of landmines. The gravel roads are full of potholes.

Welikanda is a small town, 30 km east of Polonnaruwa. It was newly built in the 1990s when Sinhalese settlers were moved into

the area. Near Aralaganwila, east of Welikanda, there is the major Aselaapura army camp. The military presence in Welikanda is all-pervasive. Everywhere there are army and police personnel, as well as home guards, both in uniform and ordinary clothes. There are checkpoints manned by police or soldiers at every junction. Passers by and vehicles are searched.

The village of Nagastenna is 1.5 km from Welikanda and there is no public transport system. People have to walk or use “land masters”—a small trailer attached to a hand tractor used for transporting produce. To reach the village, one has to take a small, badly made track that comes off the road to the army camp.

A doctor at the Welikanda hospital explained to the WSWs that, in 2004 alone, 94 people who attempted suicide had been brought in for treatment. Of those, 48 were men and 46 were women. Most were young, ranging from 14 to 20 for the women and 16 to 24 for the men.

“Most of the youth tried after failing to pass the school examinations or because they despaired for their future. Many leave school after grade 7 or 8. Without good education facilities or the means to continue education, they have no confidence in any future prospects through education. Boys who leave school go to work in the family field while girls try to marry in order to live.

“Because of the economic difficulties they have faced since their childhood, men and women face various kinds of physical weakness. It causes mental and physical problems for them. When compared to other areas the situation here is acute. At the age of 30-32 people become thin. It is tragic. They become disfigured and look old when they are just 35-40.

People suffer from a number of illnesses, including kidney trouble, because they have no alternative but to drink unsafe water from the canals. Most villagers do not have tanks to collect rain water. Often the canal water is polluted by water from the paddy fields, which is contaminated with agricultural chemicals. Only 3.5 percent of people in the Polonnaruwa district have piped water.

Villagers explained to the WSWs that some parents give their children to the temples so that they will be ordained as monks, because the family has no means to feed them.

There is a relentless logic to the poverty that many farmers in the area confront. Their outlays are increasing, in part because successive governments have ended subsidies as part of the IMF-dictated market reforms. At the same time, the price for produce has been dropping because the previous government-backed marketing schemes have been dismantled. For many farmers, the unfettered operation of the market spells disaster.

The current government-guaranteed price for a kilogram of paddy rice is 15.50 rupees and even this is barely enough to cover costs. Farmers told the WSWs that “because this is election time, the cooperatives are buying paddy rice, but it is just for show.” The government did not allocate enough money to buy all the crops.

To buy the estimated crop of 30 million kilograms in just the Polonnaruwa district at the guaranteed price would have required an allocation of 465 million rupees. But the government set aside only 1,000 million rupees for the whole country. Just prior to the September suicides, the Dimbulagala cooperative sent a letter to its branches not to buy rice at the guaranteed price because there was

not enough money. Rice just piled up at farmers’ houses.

E.B. Piyadasa, a 37-year-old farmer from Saman Kumara’s village, explained: “We have to spend about 50,000 rupees to cultivate a hectare. If we sell a kilogram at 11 rupees, the problem is we cannot recover our costs. During the last season, to prepare one hectare, we had to spend 6,500 on diesel. But because the diesel price has gone up our costs have also gone up by 2,000 rupees.”

Several farmers explained that as they become more indebted they have to turn to private traders and money lenders. Traders sell fertilisers and other chemicals on advance, but at a higher price. Although the government subsidised price for a 50 kg bag of urea is 550 rupees, a farmer can pay up to 650 or 700 rupees. Private moneylenders charge exorbitant interest rates of 30 to 50 percent for a 5-6 month growing season. They collect the proportion of the crop equivalent to the money loaned, plus interest collected just after the harvest.

The rural crisis is affecting not only small farmers. Thousands of small rice mills have been closed down, unable to compete with the big mills. About 2,000 of the island’s 7,000 small mills have closed and the condition of others is fast deteriorating. As a result, thousands of jobs in the rural areas have been wiped out. Last year, there were cases of small mill-owners committing suicide.

Now that the election is over and Mahinda Rajapakse has been sworn in as president, all of his promises will quickly be dropped. Like previous governments, the next one will be compelled to impose the dictates of the World Bank and the IMF, which will only further undermine the precarious position of small farmers throughout the island, no doubt leading to further tragedies.



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