

Maruthamunai: a tsunami-devastated village in Sri Lanka

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Last week a WSWs reporting team visited Maruthamunai, one of the villages in Sri Lanka most affected by the tsunami last December. It is situated in the Amparai district, about 260 kilometres from Colombo in the war-ravaged eastern province.

Houses in the village were previously built within 7.5 metres of the sea, but the huge tsunami waves swept nearly one kilometre inland. Now, as far as 250 metres from the shore, there are only house foundations.

The villagers were in a subdued mood. A year later, not a single permanent shelter has been built. Those who were displaced live in transitional shelters, their own partially damaged houses or with relatives.

According to statistics published by the Eastern Social Mobilisation Organisation (ESMO), a non-government organisation, there were 4,739 families or 17,393 people in this relatively large village before the disaster. Among them were fishermen, handlooms weavers, small business people, poultry and animal farmers and government employees.

The waves killed 922 people and displaced 11,086. Officially, 1,391 houses were completely destroyed and 1,359 were partially damaged. Yet, construction is still only in the initial stages on just 100 permanent new houses.

Twice during the past 12 months, in April and May, villagers organised protests, requesting proper relief and permanent houses but to no avail.

By contrast, they recalled Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala volunteers coming to help them immediately after the disaster struck. “We are still wearing the clothes provided by these sympathetic people,” several people told us.

Ayathulla Beebee, a 33-year-old widow, related her harrowing experience: “I lost my husband and two of my children. Our house was totally destroyed. Now I am a widow with two children. Our house was in the buffer zone. Because of the government’s restriction, I can’t

imagine when our housing problem will be solved.

[The government initially prohibited rebuilding within a 200-metre buffer zone for the north and east and a 100-metre zone for the south. After protests, however, the restriction was abolished for the south and reduced to 65 metres in the east and north.]

“Presently we live in a small hut provided by a NGO. As you can see, we don’t have basic facilities. We all have to use common toilets. Tankers supply drinking water, but for washing and bathing we have to use water from a well that has not been cleaned since the tsunami. If we want clean water, we have to walk about 2 km.

“I have no income. Like many others, we depend on relief given by NGOs and charity organisations. My six-year-old child is going to school and the other one is only two years old. You just imagine how I can look after them without a permanent income.

“There are about 50 widows like me with children and small babies. Neither the government nor our leaders have cared for our plight. We heard many speeches from politicians over the past year about concessions and improving our conditions. But so far nothing has happened.”

Before the tsunami, there were 341 fishing families in Maruthamunai. Among them, 113 people were killed. They all lost boats and fishing nets.

I.M. Thalif explained: “We lost our boats and nets. We heard that NGOs provided some 32 boats and also nets. But we had no chance of getting them. They were donated through the fisheries department offices. We were asked to pay for these donated things—5,000 rupees or more for a boat. How could we pay such an amount of money without any income? Those boats went to businessmen.”

Out of 1,084 families previously employed in weaving, 366 lost their handlooms. According to the divisional secretariat, the losses to the village’s weaving industry amount to about 6.8 million rupees. Those dependent on

weaving now face severe difficulties.

H.M.M Nazar, 48, explained that hand weavers had been given no support to restart the industry. “We are in a really hopeless situation,” he said.

Two schools in the area—Shams Central Collage and Pulvaramani Sarifudeen—were completely destroyed. Their classes are currently conducted at temporary locations. A.R. Mohammed Thawfeek, the vice principal of Shams College, explained:

“We had 1,450 students, of whom 108 lost their lives. The school buildings were totally destroyed. Presently we are conducting classes in a half constructed building, which belongs to a mosque. Also, we use a number of small huts on privately-owned land around the mosque.”

More than three-quarters of the school’s students were affected. They lost not only their homes but also at least one person in their family. With the assistance of various NGOs, they have been able to continue their education.

“Before the tsunami we had manageable facilities and resources. As the school was in the buffer zone declared after the tsunami, the education ministry asked us to locate an alternative site. A well-wisher of the village, currently in London, bought us a site.”

But the site is a paddy field and it has to be filled with earth. It will take time to construct a school with basic facilities. The government has reportedly signed an agreement with World Vision, but people do not know when the construction work will begin.

“After the tsunami, a number of Muslim leaders came but nothing much happened. It is difficult to manage 1,450 students in different places. The government has changed the buffer zone limit from time to time. Earlier it was 200 metres, later it was 100 metres and now it is 65 metres, they say,” the vice principal said.

Nothing has changed, even though several ministers visited the site and expressed their desire to help rebuild the school. The only recent visits were to garner votes for candidates in the November 17 presidential election.

Unemployment is a serious problem in the area. A 24-year-old student from Southeastern University in Batticaloa, who lost his family and is presently staying with a relative, commented:

“We used to do carpentry and sometimes joined fishermen. Now, we have no work at all. I think unemployment is the biggest problem in this area. Every government is defending the interests of exploiters, not ours. They are not interested in providing facilities to restart our industry. But you can see how much money they have wasted on the war in this country. They are

slashing funds for education and health, and have no proper plan to provide jobs for the youth.

“As long as the private property system continues, this situation will also continue. The wars against Afghanistan and Iraq also are wars against the people of those countries and for the domination of natural resources.

“The people don’t want war. The LTTE [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam] and the politicians are stoking up all types of divisions. We want to unite. But they want to divide us. When we faced the tsunami, those who first came to help us were ordinary people from all over the country. Without considering whether we were Sinhalese, Tamil or Muslim, they helped us,” he recalled.

He expressed opposition to communal politics of all types. A few weeks after the tsunami, the JVP, a Sinhala chauvinist party, came to the area, did some work and promised more help, but never returned.

He also pointed to the LTTE’s communalism. A Muslim person bought land behind the Pandiruppu Hindu College to resettle tsunami-affected people. When work began, the LTTE sent a message demanding that it stop as the land was a “Tamil” area.

“Tamil people have the right to fight for democratic rights. But the LTTE suppresses the Muslim minority in their areas. The Muslim leaders have no clear policy to defend our people. They demand a separate [Muslim] administrative area. It will only lead to increased tension among the people,” he said.

Incapable of addressing the social needs of the tsunami victims, the ruling elites—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—have sought to divert growing tensions into communal conflict. Like other areas of the north and east, the villagers of Maruthamunai are increasingly apprehensive that rising violence and killings will lead to a return to all out war.



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