

One year after the tsunami, Sri Lankan survivors still live in squalour

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On the anniversary of the December 26 tsunami, the Sri Lankan government called for two minutes silence nationwide in “commemoration of the dead,” for prayers by people of all religions and for the organised giving of alms. Given that many tsunami survivors are still living in squalid temporary accommodation, the whole exercise was a sham.

On the day, President Mahinda Rajapakse attended an official function along with diplomats, the military top brass and religious leaders at Peraliya, where the huge waves had swept over a train, killing 1,500 passengers as well as about 1,000 villagers. None of the locals attended because the entire area was fenced off and heavily guarded.

Rajapakse declared that “under his personal direction,” he would “carry forward with new and greater energy the task of building the homes and other property”. He said nothing concrete about the promises made during his election campaign last month and was compelled to obliquely admit that the victims of the tsunami had not received “maximum justice”.

The president devoted a considerable part of his speech to hailing the role of the military. Surrounded by the heads of the army, navy and airforce, he praised soldiers who had sacrificed their meals to feed Tamils and “even saved the lives of members of the LTTE”. In reality, the official relief operation was a shambles from the outset. If not for the dedicated work of many volunteers, who spontaneously stepped in to help the victims, the death toll would have been far higher.

According to the World Bank Tsunami Fact Sheet on Sri Lanka released on December 15, the disaster killed 35,322 people and injured another 21,411 people. Over half a million people—516,150—were internally displaced and some 150,000 people lost their livelihoods. In all, 88,544 houses were destroyed or

badly damaged. Around 200,000 students have suffered as a result of the destruction or damage to 166 schools, 4 universities, and 18 vocational training centres. The tsunami destroyed or damaged 97 health facilities, including hospitals, dispensaries and health care centres.

The Sri Lankan government and foreign donors have made numerous promises. However, for many of those left homeless and without income, life has not improved a year after the disaster. Nearly 80,000 families still have no permanent accommodation. They are living in “transitional” houses, refugee camps or so-called welfare centers, or with their relatives. Much of the temporary accommodation is cramped and lacking in basic facilities.

According to the World Bank Fact Sheet, 54,102 “transitional” houses have been completed and another 1,948 units are still under construction. A UN report issued this month entitled “The Tsunami Card Report: Indicators” found that just 6,179 permanent houses had been repaired or built, while 12,853 were under construction.

Non-government organisations (NGOs) and some private companies have been involved in reconstruction. Under a World Bank housing scheme, the bank provides 400,000 rupees (\$US4,000) and the government another 250,000 rupees to replace a completely destroyed house. For a partially damaged house, the sum of 100,000 rupees is provided.

According to the Sri Lanka Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), however, the grants for rebuilding and repairing houses are inadequate. Construction costs have risen against initial estimates and the IPS Report documented many complaints of official corruption and bureaucratic obstruction.

Those who lost their livelihoods are being employed

for reconstruction projects under various “cash for work” and “food for work” programs. Under the “cash for work” program, workers receive just 300-350 rupees a day. Originally, NGOs paid between 750 and 1,000 rupees per day but the rate has been scaled back dramatically.

The tsunami victims initially received a monthly grant of 5,000 rupees per family to help sustain them, but that has been discontinued. In the course of his election campaign last month, Rajapakse promised to reinstate the payments, but that is yet to be done.

The high death toll was in large part due to the lack of any tsunami warning system. At least two hours elapsed between the huge earthquake near Sumatra and the arrival of the tsunami on the east coast of Sri Lanka. It took another hour or more, for the waves to sweep around the southern coasts. There was no official warning and most people had no idea what to do.

A year later there is still no comprehensive tsunami warning system for the Indian Ocean. The WSWs contacted Wajira Irugalbandara, director of the recently established National Council for Disaster Management. He said money had been allocated from the 2006 budget for disaster management, including a centre in the country connected to a regional early warning system. He could not specify when it would be completed.

In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, the international and local media speculated that the tragedy would bring the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) together in renewed peace talks to end the country’s 20-year civil war. President Chandrika Kumaratunga appealed for “unity” and declared that Sinhalese, Muslims and Tamils should come together to “rebuild the nation”.

Instead, the opposite has taken place. As social discontent has risen, including among tsunami victims, the ruling elites have deliberately stirred up communal tensions as a diversion. The Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), one of Kumaratunga’s allies, and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) waged a campaign against plans for a temporary joint mechanism with the LTTE for the distribution of aid to victims in the North and East.

In June, the JVP pulled out of the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) after Kumaratunga signed the post-tsunami operational management

structure (PTOMS) agreement with the LTTE. The Supreme Court effectively scuttled the arrangement after ruling that the key aspects were unconstitutional. As a result, virtually no assistance had been provided in the North and East where the majority of victims are Tamils and Muslims.

Rajapakse, who stood as the UPFA candidate in the November presidential election, signed electoral deals with the JVP and JHU that included a series of provocative demands on the LTTE. Among them was the abandonment of the PTOMS agreement. Since Rajapakse’s election, there has been a sharp escalation in attacks on the armed forces and in provocative measures by the Sri Lankan military.

The experience of the last year is a damning indictment of the ruling class and its politicians. Manifestly incapable of addressing the basic needs of tsunami victims, or the population as a whole, the ruling elites deliberately inflame ethnic tensions to divide working people and divert attention from their own failed policies and broken promises. A year after the tsunami devastated coastal communities—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike—the country is being dragged back into bloody communal conflict.



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