

Uncollected garbage highlights infrastructure breakdown in Sri Lanka

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Residents in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo and the adjoining Dehiwela-Mount Lavinia, Kotte and Moratuwa districts, are facing serious health hazards because municipal authorities have failed to collect garbage for weeks, leaving it rotting at roadsides.

Many residents are now compelled to dispose waste in their own gardens. Those without gardens have to dump their rubbish on the streets. Even in the few areas where local councils have arranged ad-hoc collections, no regular street cleaning is taking place.

The crisis is part of a wider and long-term deterioration of basic infrastructure, including city cleaning systems and maintenance facilities, mainly due to protracted and deep spending cuts by the national government. Discontent is rising because, despite paying higher local government taxes, residents face flooding whenever rains are heavy, narrow potholed roads, a poorly functioning sewerage system, and frequent water and power cuts.

Colombo's municipalities have lacked proper garbage disposal systems for years. Their common practice was to dump rubbish on marshy or unused lands—in short, anywhere they could find—ignoring the health problems. Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) had an agreement with a private company, Burns Environmental and Technologies Ltd (BETL), which collected garbage from one dumping site to process as compost manure.

A legal dispute with the company has gone to the courts, leaving that site full and unable to take more waste. Deputy mayor Azath Salley told the WSWs on January 18 that the court case was continuing, so the situation was dragging on. But even when the arrangement with BETL was in place, the council failed to address the basic problems.

Likewise, Dehiwela-Mount Lavinia Municipal

Council used marshland at Karadiyana in Kesbawa, about 17 kilometres from Colombo. Several months ago residents, angered by the health dangers, began picketing and blocking municipal vehicles. When the municipal authorities called in the police to break up the blockade, residents took legal action, winning a court order to halt the dumping. The council has since put up posters requesting residents not to dispose of any “more garbage” until the problem is solved.

Dr Pradeep Kariyawasam, the head of the CMC's public health department, told the WSWs about the health risks, including plague and dengue fever.

“It creates health problems for the people, physically, mentally and also socially, though not directly. It could bring threats of diseases like rabies and the plague. The number of stray dogs and cats has risen recently due to the accumulation of garbage. We have complained about increases in rat numbers, which could cause a plague epidemic.

He drew attention to the problems that had arisen in Indian cities that were commercialised and grew in population without proper infrastructure. “In the Indian city of Surat (in Gujarat), this type of accumulation of garbage led to rats breeding and that was a factor in the plague outbreak there in 1994.

“This situation also raises the danger of dengue fever. Although the garbage does not directly cause dengue it could become breeding grounds for dengue mosquitoes. In October two years ago, dengue cases were at zero, but last October about 30 cases were reported from Colombo.”

Shortly after being elected as Sri Lanka's president, Mahinda Rajapakse called a meeting of municipal authorities in early December and asked them to produce at least a short-term solution. He was simply seeking to defuse the anger of people over a breakdown

for which the national government bears primary responsibility.

The *Asian Tribune* reported on January 16 that a committee appointed by Rajapakse is finalising a report. It is considering proposing a “high cost incinerator,” said to be worth 600 million rupees, or the handing over of garbage collection to a private company. With local elections due in March, an ad-hoc arrangement has been reached with the BETL company and some garbage collection has resumed. But piles of rubbish remain throughout the city.

In the past, from the 1950s and into the 1970s, local government bodies, including the CMC, provided basic welfare facilities. The central government contributed funds so that the local authorities could maintain the services and infrastructure. Over recent years, however, the government has started slashing these funds in order to reduce its budget deficits and implement the economic reform program directed by the IMF and the World Bank.

In its budget for 2003, for example, the CMC expected government grants of 640.77 million rupees (about \$US7 million at the time). But the actual amount received was just 398.71 million rupees. In 1970, government grants represented 25.4 percent of the CMC’s total revenue but the percentages for 2004 and 2005 were 16.9 and 16.6 respectively.

The free market policies pursued since 1977 have led to a migration into Colombo by workers seeking jobs. An estimated 200,000 people travel into Colombo city every day for work. New commercial offices, luxury and ordinary hotels and large condominiums have been built. Colombo’s solid waste has increased to some 750 tonnes a day, up from about 500 tonnes in 1992.

Funding cuts have also meant assigning city cleaning to private profit-making companies, whose practices have only worsened the situation, as a group of CMC workers explained to the WSWS.

“We collect garbage every day. We have to dump it on land at Bloemendhal in Mutuwal (within Colombo city) that belongs to a private company. The council pays huge sums of money to the company per kilogram. If the company does not destroy the garbage in time and it accumulates for two or three days, then it increases our workload.

“Each day, five or four of us have to collect and load some 15 to 20 tonnes. When the garbage accumulates

we have to work overtime. If we are unable to collect all the accumulated garbage the municipal authorities cut our overtime payments.

“We also have to load rotting waste with our bare hands. For about 10 years, the municipal council has stopped providing boots or gloves. We get only two pieces of soap each per month and we do not get any germicide to clean our bodies.”

A group of Dehiwela-Mount Lavinia Municipal Council (DMMC) workers complained of similar conditions.

“As municipal workers, we are regarded as local government servants. But we don’t receive Sunday holidays and public holidays. Our working week is seven days. We have to report for work at 6.00 in the morning. Our groups of six or seven must each cover about seven or eight roads, which is a heavy load. Although gloves are provided, they are not fit for use.”

One DMMC employee sheeted home to the authorities the responsibility for the garbage crisis. “There should be an overall plan to handle the garbage problem. It must come from the top. We have to do what we are told by higher officers. Just dumping the garbage somewhere is not a solution.”



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