

Protesting Sri Lankan tsunami refugees occupy government building

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Tsunami refugees from Kalmunai in eastern Sri Lanka occupied local divisional secretariat premises on February 22 in an angry protest over the failure of government authorities to provide permanent housing. The mostly Muslim and Tamil populated area was one of the worst affected by the tidal wave which struck Sri Lanka on December 26, 2004. Fourteen months later, the refugees are still living in temporary shelters.

The occupation forced the closure of the Kalmunai municipal council, the area health department and the urban development authority. It ended on March 1, after Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse, via a special satellite communication link, promised protestors that they would be provided permanent housing within three months.

Because the government has banned all new construction within a 65-metre “buffer zone” from the shore, over 400 mainly poor Muslim fishing families have been forced to live in sub-standard temporary accommodation. Most of them are housed in huts made from tin sheets and on private land donated by people in the area. Not a single house has been built for the refugees and some of the landowners now want their property back.

The protest won wide support from Muslim, Tamil and Sinhala people in the area and was backed by a hartal (local general strike and shop closure) on February 27, which shut down Kalmunai town and bazaars in the adjoining areas of Maruthamunai and Sainthamaruthu. Not a single politician, either from the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) or opposition parties, visited the protest.

Fed up with various false promises from politicians, the occupiers insisted on a written assurance from President Rajapakse that his government would rapidly provide housing. Ampara District Secretary M.H.

Herath Abeweera, the top government officer in the district, met with the protestors. He claimed to have no power to settle their demands but requested a satellite communication link for direct discussions between the president and the refugees.

According to last year’s World Bank Tsunami Report on Sri Lanka, the disaster killed 35,322 people and injured another 21,411, with over half a million people internally displaced and some 150,000 who lost their livelihoods. In all, 88,544 houses were destroyed or badly damaged. Fourteen months later there are still 80,000 Sri Lankan families without permanent homes.

While government authorities have largely abandoned the tsunami victims in all areas, the neglect is particularly obvious in Ampara district where Kalmunai is located. Three weeks ago in Tirukovil, Ampara District Secretary Abeweera told a meeting that the tsunami killed 6,000 people and destroyed 27,000 homes in the district. He admitted, however, that only 296 homes had been provided for the survivors in the Addalaichenai, Pottuvil and Tirukovil divisions.

Kalmunai Divisional Secretary A.H.M. Anzar told the WSWS: “People have accused me of doing nothing to solve their housing problems but what can I do? I have done some things that are under my control but there is the land problem. The government has to allocate land for houses to be built. The NGOs are not ready to spend money buying land and because of that several housing project agreements have been cancelled.”

WSWS reporters spoke with some of those involved in the occupation. They were from Kalmunaikudi, which adjoins Kalmunai town, and where hundreds of homes were washed away. They explained how President Rajapakse had broken his promises to the

refugees.

“Before the elections President Rajapakse addressed a public meeting in our area and promised that if elected he would build us houses within two months. So we voted for him. But three months have passed since he was elected president and not a single house has been built.” At the same time their monthly subsidy was cut and the NGOs stopped their assistance.

A.M. Rahim, a 34-year-old fisherman, said: “I lost my wife in tsunami and am living in a temporary shelter with my two children. There are no facilities for them to study in the shelter and the government subsidy of 375 rupees per head (\$US3.65) was cut two months ago. The government promised that tsunami-affected families would get 5,000 rupees (\$US48) for up to six months but we only received it for four months.

“It was also said that there would be 100,000 rupees compensation paid for each family member killed by the tsunami but all we got was 15,000 rupees. And the government promised to build us houses at Karawapattu. It started to fill that muddy land with sand but no construction has started yet.”

P.M. Samsudeen, president of a local fishermen’s union, explained: “The government and other politicians are not supporting us and so we had to organise our own support for this struggle. We supplied food and other essentials and every fisherman who owns a boat donates fish. People are helping us across ethnic and religious differences. Even though there are four government ministers from our electorate none of them came to see us.”

Samsudeen said that the tsunami had dramatically disrupted his family who share a 30 square foot (9 m2) room with his daughter’s family. Speaking about the dangers of renewed civil war, he said: “We support permanent peace. We oppose war. We Muslims are living with Tamils as brothers and the war has affected both of us severely. And as fishermen we confronted great difficulties fishing during the war period.”

Another fisherman, S.L. Jalaldeem, 21, explained that none of the school children affected by the tsunami had received the 200 rupees per month promised by the government. L. Kathiga, a mother of four children, added: “How can we live in a room only 10 foot by 10 foot with adult children and a room which is hot in the daytime and cold in the night.”

S. Subaideen, who was also involved in the

occupation, said: “We lost our four-year-old child in the tsunami and this made my wife mentally ill. Since then she has been unable to feed our other child and although we are living at a relative’s house there is not enough room for all of us. How can we live at other people’s house for a long period?” He said that doctors had told him that about 50 percent of the people in the area were suffering some form of psychological illness related to the tsunami.

Notwithstanding Rajapakse’s assurances, those involved in the occupation are preparing to widen their campaign. Occupation committee vice president M. Basheer told the WSW: “If the president fails to implement [his promise], we will organise our fight on an even bigger scale.”



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