

# Sri Lankan tsunami victims speak out

Our reporters  
30 December 2006

On the eve of the second anniversary of the 2004 Asian tsunami disaster, a WSWs reporting team visited Matara to meet tsunami survivors. Matara, one of the worst hit areas, is a coastal town, 160 kilometres south of Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital.

In the Matara district, 82,067 people from 20,675 families were affected by the tsunami. According to official reports, the death toll was 1,321, with 6,652 injured and 601 missing. Of the 9,491 people displaced, 3,086 were put in 22 camps, while 6,405 lived with host families, mainly relatives and friends. A total of 2,233 houses were destroyed and 6,075 partially damaged.

The Rassandeniya Tsunami Housing Project, five kilometres from Matara town, is one of the schemes for victims. There are 30 houses in the scheme, built on sloping coconut land. Most residents came from a fishing community in Matara fort. When WSWs correspondents arrived, people were preparing to commemorate the deaths of their loved ones.

**Sarath**, a fisherman, recalled the disaster. “That day I was at home and was having a chat with my wife. Suddenly we heard a huge noise from the seaside and I saw people running, shouting, toward the land. Within a few seconds, a massive wave came and took me away. I lost consciousness for some time and found myself in hospital. Later I learnt about the death of my wife and many relatives. However, my children survived.

“Since then we have gone through terrible conditions. Many fishermen had to abandon their livelihoods for a long time because they lost their boats and other utilities. Without a permanent residence, you can’t fish. Some people couldn’t mentally prepare for fishing again, and abandoned it. Many people who were engaged in jobs related to the fishing industry also lost their livelihoods.”

**Lasintha Ruwani**, a young housewife, said: “As a

fishing community we lived very close to the sea. Despite our objections, the authorities provided houses for us five kilometres away from our fishing port. My husband has to leave for work before 4 a.m. and, due to the poor transport service, he has to ride his bicycle. We have to leave our boats on the seashore without any security. Every day we face the risk of losing boats.”

**Piyadasa**, a postal worker asked us to see the housing project’s infrastructure. “Look at the access and inner roads they have provided. Just gravel roads without tar and side gutters. All the roads have washed away due to the heavy rain and you can see deep and broad ruts in the roads. In emergencies we can’t take patients to hospital because drivers refuse to drive on these roads.”

**A group of housewives** gathered and angrily expressed their concerns. “Come inside and see the dangers that we face,” one said. “Cracks are developing in the walls because the houses are built on filled soil on a slope without building standards or professional supervision. After just two months, doors and windows have gone out of shape and they can’t be opened or closed.”

Soil was washed away by rain and one house was about to collapse. Some residents had left to avoid another “tsunami-like disaster,” one housewife said. Residents received running water only after 9.30 p.m. Overhead tanks were not provided, leaving people to struggle to collect water for the next day.

“A few days ago we were informed that [government minister] Mangala Samaraweera would come to see our housing scheme. We were waiting to lobby him and ask him to solve our problems regarding the construction. When he heard about our anger, we think he cancelled his visit. This is the response of the ministers to our problems.”

At another camp at the Kitulewela Buddhist temple, many families still live in temporary shelters with wooden walls and galvanised roofs.

**M.T.S. Tharindu**, a young boy, explained his experiences. “In the beginning there were 60 families in this camp. We had to live in tents, with two families in each 20 foot by 20 foot tent. There were various charity organisations and social groups, but they disappeared after a few months. We were neglected and isolated from society.

“Life became terrible and we all suffered. After some time, the authorities provided these temporary shelters. A few months ago, 29 families left for houses provided by different donor organisations. Another 10 families are supposed to receive houses but no one knows when. These temporary shelters are becoming permanent for us.”

Another 21 families were not included on the housing beneficiary lists and would never receive houses. “According to what we have heard, the authorities are going to dismantle these camps before December 31 and all of us will have to take to the streets,” he said.

**L. H. Norton**, a 50-year-old fisherman, said: “We hate all the politicians and political parties in this country. They have badly neglected us. Minister Chandrasiri Gajadheera [Matara district MP for the Communist Party] discriminated against us because we belonged to another caste. What is his communism? In selecting beneficiaries, he gave priority to his own caste people.

“We realised the real nature of some Buddhist monks in this horrible situation. It is a shame to tell you. The leading monk of ‘Walukaramaya’ in Pamburana strongly opposed us having the adjoining land for a housing scheme just because we were other caste people.”

**L.H. Madushani Hasanthi**, the camp’s welfare society secretary, angrily denounced the government’s war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. “Now President Mahinda Rajapakse is intensifying the war. Who is losing in this war? The poor like us. Children are losing their fathers. Wives are losing their husbands. Parents are losing their children. We are losing our brothers. Why do they join the army? Only because of unemployment. They don’t have any other alternative.”

“We are still in these temporary huts. They don’t have money to provide houses for us, but they waste billions on this war. Look at the cost of living. Now one kilo of sugar is 55 rupees, a kilo of rice is 30 and a

coconut is 25 rupees. How can we afford that? No one in this camp has a permanent job and many people work as daily-paid labourers. On rainy days they don’t have work, and families have to starve. In these circumstances, why this war?”

**A uniformed soldier** arrived and began to talk. “I am also a tsunami victim. I lost my house and I’m still living in a camp with another 30 families. That camp was established for the affected families of security forces and police personnel. Over the past two years, nobody received a house. The president and the other politicians say we are the guardians of the country, but they treat us in this manner.”

**W. Nimalsiri**, a Ministry of Public Administration worker, said all 27 houses at the Laurien City housing project in Pamburana had been built for government workers and handed over to them in October. However, because electricity and water were yet to be supplied, only one family had moved in. There were no pavements, gutters and drains, and the toilet pits were less than one metre deep.

“The quality of construction is very poor and the doors and windows are made of cheap wood. Within a few months they will collapse. The roofs have not been fixed properly with hooks for the asbestos sheets. The sheets will come off even in a small wind. What will happen with a cyclone or tornado? I went to meet the politicians and other authorities several times regarding electricity and water supplies but all the time their answers were just ‘no allocations’.

“We are living in a rented house, paying 3,500 rupees per month. I can’t afford this anymore and that is why I am in a hurry to go. I lost my son in the tsunami and I wanted to commemorate the anniversary of his death in the new house but it became a dream. I applied for a bank loan for alms-giving to commemorate my loving son, but the bank rejected me because I am a public servant who draws a small salary.”



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