

Tens of thousands affected by Sri Lankan floods and landslides

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Tens of thousands of people were displaced by floods and landslides in mid-January in southern, central and eastern Sri Lanka. According to the Ministry of Disaster Relief Services, more than 80,000 people were forced to shelter in 80 makeshift refugee camps. Just 5 million rupees (about \$US50,000) were allocated last week to the relief effort.

Among the worst affected areas were Walapane and Hanguranketha in the central hills district of Nuwara Eliya, about 150 kilometres from Colombo. At least 16 people were killed in landslides caused by torrential rain and another five are missing. Nearly 20,000 people were left homeless as the slippages destroyed 156 homes and partially damaged another 741 in the two areas.

The government has promised to settle victims in safer areas. At the same time, however, the authorities have not spelled out how they are going to find suitable alternative land and have already said none exists. Inevitably, many of the homeless will be forced to return to the same areas, where they face the danger of future landslides.

Most people in the Walapane and Hanguranketha areas are very poor farmers who survive by growing rice or vegetables. Many rely on limited Samurdhi welfare payments. Infrastructure, including roads, hospitals and schools, is inadequate.

According to official records, many landslides have occurred in the area previously, although not of the same magnitude. Successive governments, however, have made no scientific assessment of the dangers nor made preparations to minimise any disaster. According to Professor C.B. Dissanayake from the Geological Department at Peradeniya University, no survey has been conducted of the central hills district.

Initially, President Mahinda Rajapakse, his government and the media put on a display of concern. Now, however, the disaster has been allowed to drop out of the news, leaving the victims to cope on pittances in relief handouts.

Like the 2004 tsunami disaster, the latest calamity underscores the contempt of the ruling elite for the fate of the poor.

World Socialist Web Site reporters visited the area on January 16 and 20.

At the badly affected village of Duniyagolla, the situation was appalling. Palitha Romesh, 22, was busy cleaning the mud from his home. He described how villagers had fled their homes on hearing the deafening sound of the landslide on the morning of January 12. Four houses were destroyed and others partially damaged.

Wisumperuma, a former state transport worker, explained: "We managed to leave our homes early so that we were able to escape being killed. If it had happened during night, the situation would have been worse." Most of the injuries occurred because people were fleeing in thick fog.

Mervin Dainton, a farmer, said it took a week to make the road usable. It was still not in good condition. Villagers had to use kerosene oil lamps because there was no power supply for 10 days.

People were angry about the indifference of politicians. C.B. Ratnayake, the deputy minister for disaster management and local MP, toured the area a few days after the landslide but did not bother to speak to people. His underlings informed locals that he had "promised" to rebuild their houses, but did not say when and how.

One resident pointed out that the number of people affected by the landslide was much higher than the official count, which only included those in relief camps. "Most of us did not go to relief camps even though we were advised to do so. It was not because we were not affected. We knew about life in those camps from the experiences of war refugees in north and east. I never thought we would face a similar situation here," he said.

H.M. Herath and Leela Siriwardana, both teachers at the Kumbalgamuwa school in Walapane, blamed the Ceylon

Tobacco Company (CTC)—affiliated to the multinational W & H O Wills—for contributing to the disaster. The company had encouraged local farmers to grow tobacco by clearing steep slopes between Walapane and Nildandahinna, causing erosion.

CTC has made huge profits from the tobacco grown but the farmers barely survive. Now the company has shifted to another area and closed down its tobacco-buying centre at Nildandahinna. The farmers have been left to cope as best they can.

Siriwardana explained that although teachers in the area had been paid in advance, other people had lost their crops, homes and possessions and were unlikely to get any government help. “The authorities have asked for schools to reopen but how can we evacuate the people affected by the landslide who are occupying them? A favourable situation for children to attend school has not been established yet,” she said.

Siriwardana had no faith in the government, saying: “Two years after the tsunami, refugees are still in camps.” She was opposed to the country’s escalating communal civil war. “We do not want to take away anything from the Tamil masses. I am completely against this war. We must live peacefully with other nationalities. The Sinhala people must not have any special privileges,” she said.

The Kumbalagamuwa school principal explained that the education authorities had left it to him to deal with the disaster. A circular from the regional education office ordered the reopening of schools that were not being used as relief camps, “if you think there will be no risk.”

“How can we assure people that there will be no risks?” he asked. “Relief camps have been set up in all schools in the area. A large number of families, including school children, have been severely affected. But there has not even been a meeting of principals to discuss the situation.”

Some of the victims complained of political bias. A retired school principal at the Batagolla school refugee camp explained that “those who do not support the government get step-mother treatment” in the distribution of aid.

M.S. Samarakoon, a bus driver from the village of Wewakele, said all his household items, including food, had been destroyed by the mudslide. He said he had received no assistance because he went to the home of local opposition United National Party (UNP) leader, Renuka Herath, not the relief camp.

His wife explained: “We need a road. The [previous] road was built without a proper assessment and in the

interest of politicians. All the trees and soil removed in the road building process were thrown into the waterway running above the village. The blocked water pushed all that was blocking its way, damaging houses.”

The Wewakele area was also devastated. R.M.P. Rajakaruna, 44, a transport worker, explained: “I lost about 1.5 million rupees worth of household items. We won’t be able to rebuild the house and the land is unusable. We want to settle elsewhere. We do not believe that the government will solve our problems by giving land in alternative areas. There has been no development in this area for the past 20 years.”

Rajakaruna was angry about the restarting of the civil war. “The decades-old war is the reason for the neglect of this area. Only the leaders of the security forces and the privileged few benefit from this war. Without stopping the conflict, it is not possible to provide money for the victims [of this disaster].”

At the Walapane estate, 104 families were displaced. Landslides had also hit the area in 1986. K.P. Leelananda explained: “Both of my parents worked in this village. After the 1986 landslide, the UNP government settled us in the same danger spots. Only those who supported the UNP received good plots of land. Now we are refugees again and are asked to go back to the same places. It is very dangerous.”

At Padiyapelalla in the Hanguranketha area, the situation was similar. The area was cut off by mudslides and one of the main roads was still not cleared. People had to walk about 10 kilometres to buy food. The hospital at Hanguranketha had been affected. Medicines were spoiled after power was cut off, leaving the hospital without refrigeration.

At the Hanguranketha school, a farmer from Okandagala explained that the heavy rain and landslides had destroyed his livelihood. Already farmers have been hit by rising prices for seeds, chemicals and fertiliser. Without access roads, they have to carry supplies and produce in sacks to and from market, where middlemen fleece them.



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