

Sri Lankan president marks tsunami anniversary by beating the war drums

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With more than 21,000 Sri Lankans still wallowing in squalid camps three years after the terrifying tsunami that struck the region on December 26, 2004, President Mahinda Rajapakse has used the anniversary, not to pledge more rapid reconstruction, but to defend his government's resumption of civil war.

Addressing a meeting to mark the occasion on December 26 in Matara, a southern town where the population is largely Sinhalese, Rajapakse insisted on the importance of "defeating terrorism". "We must realise that military victories will surely pave the way to push the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) to seek a political solution to the problem... Like we overcame the tsunami tragedy, we will face the threat of terrorism and overcome it soon."

Rajapakse's reference to "overcoming" the effects of the tsunami is a farce. Sri Lanka was the second most affected country, after Indonesia, from the Asian tsunami, which killed at least 230,000 people and made 1.7 million homeless. According to the latest official figures 30,920 Sri Lankans lost their lives, 117,372 houses on the island were destroyed or damaged and 562,601 people displaced. The majority of those affected were poor.

Far from being overcome, the tsunami's impact has deepened the already endemic economic and social problems of ordinary working people. Rajapakse's preoccupation, on the third anniversary of the disaster, with prosecuting war against the country's Tamil minority is aimed not at finding a "political solution" but at diverting rising anti-government sentiment into the blind alley of communalism.

In this, the president is following a well-worn path. Since independence in 1948, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has revealed itself to be organically incapable of providing a solution to the social problems and suffering of the masses. Instead, it has sought to stabilise its rule by provoking communal divisions, tensions and, ultimately, the fratricidal conflict that began in 1983. This policy was graphically demonstrated in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, when, in the areas of greatest devastation, Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim people spontaneously came together to assist each other, across ethnic lines.

Dismayed and shocked by this collaboration from below,

sections of the ruling elite, along with the various Sinhala extremist groups, such as Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), immediately intensified their racist campaign to disrupt and undermine such expressions of unity.

In his anniversary speech, Rajapakse made reference to these events. "The tsunami also brought everyone together irrespective of petty differences," he declared. But his "everyone" referred not to the ordinary masses, but to the extreme right-wing parties. In the days after the tsunami, Rajapakse sided with the JVP and the JHU, which were opposed to the distribution of tsunami aid to the LTTE-controlled Tamil majority areas. The tsunami had weakened the LTTE, they claimed, and now was the time to resume the war to "destroy" it.

Rajapakse only won the presidential election of November 2005 by a thin margin, with the help of the JVP and JHU, after he promised to "review" the ceasefire agreement (CFA) with the LTTE that had been signed in February 2002. Last July, after tensions had been mounting with the LTTE, Rajapakse openly breached the CFA and ordered the resumption of military offensives in the east. Since then, the military has taken over several LTTE-controlled areas. His resumption of war has been encouraged by the major powers, including the US. As he boasted in his speech, the "war against terrorism", was being conducted "with the blessings of the international community...".

Under Rajapakse, during the past two years, the government has increased defence allocations by 265 percent. For 2008, the war budget has been boosted by another 20 percent to a record 166 billion rupees (\$US1.5 billion).

The burden of this massive increase in war spending has fallen directly on the shoulders of ordinary people, in the form of attacks on living standards. A wave of struggles by workers, peasants and students has erupted in response. On October 13, 200,000 Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim public sector teachers carried out an island-wide strike, demanding pay rises while in November and early December, police brutally attacked demonstrations by university students.

Those who engage in such struggles are routinely branded by Rajapakse and his allies as "Sinhala Tigers" (Sinhalese

supporters of the LTTE) or as “traitors to the motherland” in order to intimidate others—including angry tsunami victims in the refugee camps and in the newly-built, but sub-standard shelters—from protesting their conditions.

The resumption of war has resulted in more than 5,000 deaths and the displacement of some 250,000—including victims of the tsunami in the east and north—where the vast majority of tsunami victims are located. While many tsunami victims in the south of the country still face difficulties, the situation facing those in the north and east is far, far worse.

In a press conference on December 24, the secretary to the ministry of Nation Building and Estates’ Infrastructure Facilities, W.K.K. Kumarasiri admitted that there were still 58 camps of tsunami victims in Ampara, a war ravaged eastern provincial district. The remaining victims in the eastern province were living with war refugees in camps in the Batticaloa and Trincomalee districts.

In the LTTE-held Vanni area, the situation is particularly acute. According to the government’s Reconstruction and Development Agency (RADA), only 39 percent of the housing program in the north had been completed by October 2007.

The accuracy of these official figures has been contested by independent organisations. A statement recently issued by Transparency International of Sri Lanka (TISL) declared: “[T]here is an acute shortage of houses in the Eastern province of the country. For example, in Muttur only 422 houses have been built through donor and owner-driven housing construction programs, in place of the 1,249 houses that were destroyed.” TISL insisted that the “government statistics represent a misleading picture of ground realities” and requested that it “guarantee and respect the right to housing of the affected communities in the North and the East.”

In the south, according to Kumarasiri, there are still four tsunami victim camps in Matara and three in Galle, while in the island’s capital, Colombo, 12 camps remain, with more than 4,000 families awaiting a solution to their housing problems.

The state of these camps is appalling. Many of the shelters are made of tin sheeting, with leaky, palm leaf roofs. There is a shortage of toilets and those that exist often overflow when it rains.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) declared that Sri Lanka’s tsunami housing program “cannot be considered to be completed”, since many of the new settlements lacked access to roads, water, electricity and basic health services. People who received new houses were commonly disappointed over the standard of construction. Without proper planning, construction of permanent shelters and boats was often unsupervised and below standard. The TISL statement noted: “It is common to find a general level of dissatisfaction among the residents of newly built houses, particularly in the South. This dissatisfaction is well supported in most cases where poor quality houses or culturally and environmentally insensitive construction challenge the healthy occupancy of the houses.”

Herman Kumara, a leading figure in the fishermen’s National Fisheries Solidarity Movement, told the media. “In a recent survey we did, we found that the walls of new houses are already cracking and there are gaps between the roofs and the walls.” His organisation has also made complaints about boats not being seaworthy because of substandard manufacture.

The rebuilding of schools has yet to be completed, particularly in the northeast. According to a December 23 report in the *Sunday Times*, an official of the Tsunami Education Rehabilitation Monitor (TERM) admitted that only 100 schools had been rebuilt out of the 183 that had been damaged. Work on 40 schools still remained half finished.

In Jaffna, Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi, Trincomalee and Batticaloa in the north and east of the island, the rebuilding of 40 schools has been put on hold because of the war. The state-owned *Daily News* quoted education minister Susil Premajayantha on December 27, saying: “The government has to wait until we get the approval of the Security Forces since these schools are in the North and East.”

Much of the rebuilding effort so far has been financed by non-government organisations or foreign government. However, of the \$US3.1 billion pledged by foreign donors following the tsunami, only \$1.7 billion—just over one half—has been paid.

The fact that Rajapakse used his anniversary speech, not to review why his pledge of November 2005—to solve the housing shortage “within six months”—had been broken, but to beat the war drums even louder, makes crystal clear that his government has no intention of addressing the terrible conditions still facing tsunami victims three years after the disaster.

To resolve the fundamental social problems facing Sri Lankan workers, peasants and students requires the building of an independent political movement of the working class, aimed at immediately withdrawing all troops from the north and east, ending the war, and reconstructing society from top to bottom on the basis of genuine socialist and internationalist principles.



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