

Sri Lankan tsunami victims speak out

Our correspondents
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World Socialist Web Site reporters in Sri Lanka spoke with survivors of the 2004 tsunami in Peraliya, in southern Sri Lanka's Galle district, and Moratuwa, in the Colombo suburbs, just before the third anniversary of the catastrophe.

Peraliya, a coastal village in the Galle district and 95 kilometres from Colombo, was one of the areas most affected by the tsunami. According to official reports, 1,559 people were killed and 226 lost, presumed dead, in the district with 12,645 houses totally or partially damaged. In the Colombo district, 56 were killed, with two missing and 6,998 houses totally or partially damaged.

The worst hit area was in Sri Lanka's eastern province, where 60,280 families were displaced. Those in the east who lost their homes, crops and livelihoods three years ago have been further affected by the Rajapakse government's renewal of the civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). WSWs journalists, however, were unable to visit the eastern province and report first-hand on the situation facing tsunami survivors because of the ongoing military conflict.

Peraliya was the scene of one of the most tragic episodes on the morning of December 26, 2004 after the tsunami hit the Colombo to Matara train just as it was passing through the village. More than 1,500 men, women and children were killed. Local people were preparing to commemorate the deaths of their loved ones when WSWs correspondents arrived.

Jayanthi, 37, a housewife, recalled the disaster: "When the tsunami hit I was alone at home with my child—my husband had gone fishing—and I was cooking. Suddenly I heard one of our neighbours shouting that the sea was over-flowing. I grabbed my child and ran to high land but kept thinking about my husband out at sea. Thank god he returned unharmed.

"After a few hours we came back to see our home. It was partly damaged and so we were taken to a temple called Ethkandura. But after a few days we decided to

return to our damaged home because living conditions in the [refugee] camp were terrible.

"Months passed and we lived in constant fear that the damaged walls or the shaky roof [of the house] would fall on us. During that terrible time we were dependant on assistance from donors and various non-governmental organisations.

"We had to see so many officials to get approval for government compensation, but were only given 100,000 rupees (\$US1,000), which was not enough to repair our losses.

"Three years have now passed, but we have still not been able to restore the life we had. The situation we now face is terrible because of unbearable increases in the cost of living. Some months are very hard. We cannot afford to buy milk powder for my infant and the other kids. They ask for milk but I can only give them plain tea. We all are getting weaker from malnutrition and I'm unable to do the sort of heavy work I did two or three years ago.

Kumudini said that the houses built for tsunami survivors were unsuitable. "The houses get wet whenever it rains because there wasn't a sufficient slope made in their roofs," she said. "The walls are cracked, the toilet overflows and the doors were damaged within months so we are not secure.

"When these houses were being built we asked for the foundations to be higher than the land level but the builders didn't listen. They erected the foundations in one day, because they were in a hurry to get their money and there were no proper construction standards.

"My husband has been infected with a virus and admitted to Karapitiya hospital [in Galle]. Two of our children had to be hospitalised before him. This is because our housing is unhealthy and unsuitable for living."

Sarath, a fisherman, pointed to an abandoned boat and said: "These engineless boats are what government minister Jeyaraj Fernandopulle gave us. We lost all of our fishing gear, including the boats and nets, in the tsunami. How are we supposed to do our job if they don't give us

engines and other equipment? How can you take these boats out to sea? Everyone knows that this is a fraud.”

A group of housewives gathered around WSWS reporters angrily complaining about the Rajapakse government. One of them said: “The president and his ministers tell us to devote ourselves to the war. They say we have to tighten our belts, but they all have loose belts with big stomachs.

“The most absurd thing, however, is that the Buddhist monks tell us to starve for the war. Ellawala Medhananda Thera [a leading monk from the Jatika Hela Urumaya, the Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinist party in alliance with the Rajapakse government] tells us: ‘The price of a coconut will increase to Rs.100 but you have to tolerate it for the sake of the war’. These monks have good meals and yet they tell us we have to starve for the war. This is not our war. We are in a huge battle just to survive.”

In Moratuwa, Colombo, 230 people from 56 tsunami-affected families are still living in an abandoned two-story building near Golu Madama junction. Previously used as a police station, the accommodation is woefully inadequate, with each family, irrespective of the numbers involved, forced to share a 15 by 10 foot room, partitioned by plywood. There are only three usable toilets and two bath/showers in the whole building and the roof is badly damaged and could collapse on the occupants at any time.

Sugathadasa, 51, pointed to the building and said: “Since February 18, 2005 we’ve been living here in constant danger that this roof could fall at anytime. I can’t sleep at night because it gives me nightmares, but we cannot move out of this death trap because we are the poorest of the poor.

“The government asks us to find land to build a house but the maximum that they’ll give us is just Rs 250,000, which means we would have to move to a rural area and abandon our jobs as day workers. And even if we move to the country, it is hard to find work. Only three or five families have used government assistance to buy land in the rural areas and yet they still live here because without a shelter they can’t settle there.”

He angrily denounced Sri Lankan President Rajapakse’s broken promises to the tsunami victims. “During the election campaign Rajapakse boasted that he would solve the tsunami housing problem within six months. If he was genuine he would do as he says, but they are all liars. I have given up all hopes of a house,” he said.

“Over the past three years Minister Jeevan

Kumaratunge, who represents our electorate, has never visited us or seen the terrible situation we face. He will come, of course, to beg for our votes in the next election. He claims that Colombo people were not affected by the tsunami, but who are we?

“No other party leader or parliamentarian has visited us either. They all support this bloody war. They spend billions and billions for the war but provide nothing to solve our problems.

“I oppose this war. It has not only affected Tamils but us as well. I think Colvin R. de Silva was correct when he said that one language means two countries and two languages one country. All the rulers in Colombo, and especially the Sinhalese leaders, have plunged this country into war.

“We want a decent life just like other human beings. We would like to see a few green trees, to breathe fresh air and to have nutritional meals like other people. Why don’t they treat us as humans?” he asked.

Padmini, 45, a housewife said: “The government authorities tell us to find land but why don’t they find it for us? If they want land for a luxury housing scheme they can find it within a week.

“We’re not asking for houses in Colombo 07 [the most affluent area in Colombo] but the government has the power to acquire land in a Colombo suburb to build a housing project for all of us. But they won’t do that because we’re poor.

“You should also know about another injustice some of our colleagues face. There are five families here who do not qualify for land or a house because they were tenants when the tsunami struck. What will happen to them? Where will they go? On the street? We say that they also must have the right to a new house.”



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