Hundreds of thousands displaced by severe Sri Lankan floods

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Floods and landslides caused by heavy monsoonal rains in Sri Lanka's southern and western provinces have forced nearly 400,000 people from their homes. The official death toll had reached 20 by Wednesday. The meteorological forecasts are for more rain and flooding in the coming days.

Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake has instructed government authorities to provide relief for the victims. Many have received little or no assistance, however. Displaced people who spoke to the WSWS were angry at the government's indifference and the inadequacy of the relief effort.

Residents in villages and towns in Kalutara, Colombo and Gampaha in Western Province, Galle and Matara in Southern Province and Ratnapura, Nuwara Eliya and Kegalle in the central hills districts have been affected. In many areas, roads have been blocked by flooding and landslides, transport has halted and electricity and telephone services have been disrupted.

The worst-hit district is Kalutara where 63,000 families have been displaced and many areas are still cut off. The Kaluganga, Kukuleganga and Kudaganga rivers are all raging torrents. On Monday, a family of four, including two children, was buried in a landslide in the remote village of Welgama. Ten others have been killed in the same district. The full extent of casualties, as well as damage to houses and crops, will not be known until after the floods have receded. The poor are the hardest hit.

A report by the Disaster Management Centre showed that only 22 million rupees (less than $US220,000) has been allocated for relief operations—less than 50 rupees (50 US cents) per person. While the government announced that it had mobilised the military, the assistance has been limited. Only one helicopter has been deployed. In some areas, raging floodwaters have blocked access by boat.

After the 2004 tsunami claimed some 40,000 lives in Sri Lanka, the government boasted that it had new disaster management plans. The latest flooding demonstrates the same incompetence, lack of funding and indifference that marked the official response to the 2004 catastrophe. Many of the tsunami survivors are still living in squalid camps or with relatives, or have become completely destitute.

WSWS reporters spoke to those displaced by the flooding in a number of areas. Many said they had not received enough food and drinking water. There were no suitable places for small children and women to sleep. Some were staying in congested refugee camps with inadequate facilities.

Kulgahawatta, a rubber plantation, is submerged and around 100 families are trapped there. Among them are two children suffering from fever and a pregnant woman. Although the plantation manager has complained to authorities, no boats or helicopters were sent there to help the stranded workers.

Another 40 families are trapped at the nearby Dambalawatta rubber plantation. People are crowded into accommodation on higher ground and have received no food over the past two days. Workers have received no pay over the past four days.

In the district of Colombo, about 25,000 slum dwellers on both sides of the Kelani River have been severely affected by flooding. Many of the homeless are low-paid workers, day labourers and street vendors. They are crowded into makeshift camps in appalling conditions. Toilets are overflowing and there is the danger of disease.

Another 245 people from Kuriniyawatta in Kolonnawa have put up tents in high ground near their shanties. The entire area of the settlement is just one

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and a half hectares and much of it is under a metre of water. There are many such housing estates in Kolonnawa.

Sampath, a lorry cleaner, told the WSWS: “We still have not received adequate help. A village officer came and gave us only 40 kilos of rice, 5 coconuts, a bottle of coconut oil and about 5 kilograms each of lentils, dried fish and salt. People refused to accept it. We have no place to cook. The quantity is not enough. We have received no cooked food. We were asked to move to a camp but there is not enough room. It is always like this.

“I went to school up to grade 8. I am married and have two children, who now have a fever. We also had floods in April. Last year the situation was the same. We can’t live with the high cost of living. They [the government] are increasing the price of everything because of the war.” Sampath wanted the war to end but had no confidence that either the government or opposition parties would halt the fighting or improve living standards.

A kilometre away, the Vidyawardana school has been converted into a camp for the displaced. Amila Janaki explained: “We came here on Monday. We stayed in our homes until the water level rose to knee deep. There are about 1,200 people here. The village officer gave us a few things. But it is not enough even for two meals. We will have to prepare one meal for both lunch and dinner.

“My husband died in a road accident about five years back. I earn my living by cooking and selling string hoppers. My brother pays for the education of my two daughters. My house is made of wooden planks. We are very poor because my husband was not made permanent in his government department. Previously you could buy something with 100 rupees, but for the same thing today you need 300 rupees. We are borrowing just to live.”

Three young workers from remote rural areas, Gamini, Chaminda and Thilanga, were among the displaced at the Vidyawardana school and were angry about the lack of aid. Thilanga from Bibile, about 250 kilometres from Colombo, said: “Only one village officer came here [to the school]. No one from disaster management came. We are still young and look after ourselves. But the old and the young need help. We helped them to get here.”

Thilanga explained that no one had any money. “About 80 percent of people are living from day to day. I earn about 6,000 rupees a month. If I do overtime I earn a bit more. The situation facing people back in our villages is similar. We get nothing to improve our conditions. All that successive governments talk about is war. They do nothing but war.”

The plight of the hundreds of thousands left homeless by the floods is just a sharp expression of what is happening to workers and the rural poor throughout the island. The huge military spending associated with the government’s renewed war has compounded rampant inflation caused by sharp price rises internationally for fuel and food. Apart from token expressions of concern, nothing has been done to address the hardship and misery being generated by the government’s policies.

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