

# Sri Lankan farmers reject president's boast of helping rural communities

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Speaking at a May Day rally in Dehiattakandiya, a remote rural town, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse claimed that his government had helped farmers to “stand on their own feet”. He claimed: “We have proved that this soil can be nourished by farming. Now the farmers are controlling the prices, not the rice millers as in the past.”

Rajapakse's speech was a pitch to rural voters just over a week before elections were held in the Eastern Province. As well as his claims to be helping farmers, the president called for a vote for the government to show support for his renewed war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The ruling coalition won a narrow majority amid widespread allegations of election violence and fraud.

WSWS reporters subsequently visited Dehiattakandiya and two neighbouring villages, Ginnoruwa and Henanigala, where more than 1,000 farming families live. These villages are on the border of the eastern province and are part of the Mahaweli irrigation project. Farmers rejected Rajapakse's claims, pointing to their poverty-stricken conditions and explaining the enormous difficulties of cultivation.

The military offensives against the LTTE have not affected these mostly ethnic Sinhalese villages, but an army camp is located nearby and checkpoints have been erected. However, the government's huge defence spending has compounded already skyrocketing international prices for fuel and food. Rajapakse's claims that small farmers are reaping the benefits of higher rice prices are a fraud.

In April, the open market price for one kilogram of paddy rice rose to 35-38 rupees, while the government's guaranteed price was 16-20 rupees. However, the price increases occurred for two reasons: one was a decline in paddy production after heavy rains devastated many areas during the last October-April Maha season; the other was rising world rice prices. Even for those farmers who sold their rice at the higher prices, their incomes have been hit by rising costs for fuel, fertilisers and pesticides. The market price has since come down to 28-32 rupees a kilogram,

Successive coalition governments, led by Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the opposition United National Party (UNP), have failed to provide an adequate guaranteed price or a proper mechanism to purchase crops from farmers. During the past year, angry farmers in some areas destroyed their harvest because of low prices. A high suicide rate prevails among rural farmers who confront poverty and indebtedness.

Speaking to the WWS, A.M. Gunapala, 60, of Ginnoruwa explained: “Farmers have not benefited from the recent paddy price increases. Production costs and the cost of living have gone up. The only concession we have is a fertiliser subsidy, but farmers need about 60,000 rupees (\$US550) to cultivate and harvest a hectare. As the oil prices have gone up, tractor and machine fees have risen. Tractor charges have gone up by 2,500 rupees per hectare from last year.

“A hectare requires 150 kilograms of seeds. One kilogram of paddy seeds has gone up to 70 rupees. A 50 kilogram bag of fertiliser is 3,500 rupees, even with subsidies. A hectare needs nine and a half bags of fertiliser.”

Weed killer and pesticide prices have gone up by 100 percent and over 30 percent, respectively, since 2006. According to farmers, the maximum harvest per hectare is 5,000 kilograms of paddy. If they sell that paddy at the present market rate they would get 140,000-160,000 rupees. Once production costs are deducted, however, their income will be 80,000-100,000 rupees for six months.

Paddy prices, however, are not decided and controlled by farmers but by big rice businesses and rice mill owners. The costs of production are also determined by the companies producing and marketing the essentials for cultivation.

From the mid-1980s, governments systematically closed down state-owned Paddy Marketing Board (PMB) stores and mills as part of free market policies. Confronted by farmers' protests demanding reasonable prices, the government set up paddy purchasing centres in 2006. But the centres were not provided with enough funds or storage facilities and refused to purchase some crops.

D.M.I.G. Sudubanda, 73, a father of five children, previously lived at Walapone in the Nuwara Eliya district of the central tea plantation area, with sizable cultivable land and a house. When a reservoir was built nearby, he and other families were evicted from the village and dumped at Ginnoruwa, an uncleared area, in the 1980s.

“My sons do not have enough land to cultivate. As they are married and have separate families, I divided my land among them. We can only produce sufficient rice for our own consumption. For other expenses, we have to do odd jobs. My sons, like others, go to Colombo or other places searching for work. Mostly they are helpers on construction sites.

“In the 1950s and 1960s, farmers were relatively better off.

Since then, our living conditions have turned from bad to worse. During elections, various politicians make rosy promises but then you do not see them until the next election.”Over the past year, a 225-gram piece of soap has risen up by six rupees, while the price of sugar and milk powder has each gone up by 50 percent. “It goes on like that. So, what we have gained from increasing paddy prices?” he quipped.

Sudubanda has voted UNP and SLFP alternately. During the eastern provincial council election he decided not to vote for any party. “I am really disgusted with these parties. Really, we want an alternative party, which fights for rights of workers and peasants,” he added. “The war is disastrous. The youth join the army because they have no jobs. We do not want the war, but peace.”

The villages are in Zone C of the Mahaweli irrigation scheme. In the early 1980s, some 26,529 families from various parts of the country were settled there without basic infrastructure. They were each given one hectare of wet lands and 0.405 hectare of dry lands.

Since then, the population has increased several-fold. The lands have been divided among new families and thousands of landless families have settled in surrounding areas, where they can be evicted by the state-controlled Mahaweli Authority. More than 500 new families live in Ginnoruwa and Henanigala. Without permanent incomes, they do casual work. Some are tenant farmers, paying 1,320 kilograms of rice per hectare to the land owner.

A.H. Nihal Perera of Henanigala is a tenant farmer with three children. He cultivated 2 hectares this season and produced only 7,000 kilograms of paddy, out of which he has to pay 2,640 kilos to the land owner. Unable to feed his family from the crop, he does odd jobs. He said his family had cut down food consumption because of high prices.

“In the 2004 general election I voted for the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), hoping they would work for us, but they did nothing. In the 2005 presidential election I voted for Mahinda Rajapakse. He boasted last year about the liberation of the East [from the LTTE] and the revival of the province. We cannot see any revival here. Even for a project to provide drinking water, authorities demanded 10,000 rupees per family. After we protested, the amount was reduced to 2,500 rupees. But how can we pay even that?”

U.W. Kusumawathi is a young mother living in Henanigala. Unable to find a proper job locally, her husband has migrated to Colombo and works on a construction site.

“We have no land. My father has given his land to a tenant farmer for 1,320 kilos per season because he cannot cultivate it. Our two families share the proceeds. My husband comes home every two months and brings about 10,000 rupees. It is not enough for us. We are given a 140-rupee Samurdhi token [a welfare handout] per month. I can buy only two kilos of rice because of rising prices. We rarely buy vegetables or dry fish and do not use milk powder. Mostly we eat rice with green leaves collected from our land or water canals. Our children do not wear shoes as they are expensive—they go to school wearing rubber slippers.”

Unemployment is a severe problem in the area. Because of the limited options, many young people have been compelled to join the security forces. Some find poorly paid jobs in garment factories, while others do casual work, such as digging sand on

daily wages.

Conditions in local schools are poor. A teacher from the Lihiniyagama school explained: “In our school, the teacher shortage is 30. We have only 13 permanent teachers and 11 volunteer and apprentice teachers. In this area, most schools do not have teachers for subjects such as English, aesthetics, mathematics and sports. The standard number for a class is 22 students but we have 40-45 students in one class—grades six and seven have 50 students.”

“There are 650 students in Lihiniyagama school, but we have desks and chairs for only 500. We have been compelled to use desks and chairs from the school laboratory and home science rooms. We have a library but not enough books and furniture. There is only one computer and we have no teacher for it. There is also a shortage of text books.”

T.M. Karunaratna, a farmer and father, said: “There are about 500 students at Hebarawa school, but there is no drinking water or lavatory facilities. There was a 40-year-old well, which is now dilapidated. The students have to bring drinking water from home. All the lavatories have overflowed. The principal has told the parents that funds have not been provided for school maintenance.”

For Advanced Level studies, students from Ginnoruwa and Henanigala have to travel 15 to 20 kilometres but lack proper transport services.

Health facilities are also pitiful. There are small government dispensaries at Medagama and Hebarawa, about 15 kilometres away. To take a patient to a hospital, people have to travel even further. Sometimes hiring a vehicle costs 700 to 1,000 rupees which is unaffordable for many people.

Far from allowing them to “stand on their own feet”, the Rajapakse government has only made life in rural areas more intolerable. Like other working people, farmers are being forced to bear the burden of a war that is not only claiming lives but forcing up prices and resulting in cutbacks to basic services to pay for defence spending.



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