Sri Lanka: Widespread malnutrition among women and children

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10 June 2010

Recently released surveys reveal that acute malnutrition is rife among Sri Lankan children and women, as a result of the country's 30-year civil war and widespread poverty throughout the country.

Data from a Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) by Sri Lanka's health ministry, published in the state-owned *Daily News* on May 29, revealed that child malnutrition is more than 50 percent in some areas of the East and North, with the national average at a record 29 percent.

In the Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Ampara districts in the eastern province, child malnutrition is 53, 45 and 44 percent, respectively. In the northern districts of Vavuniya and Jaffna it is 51 percent and 43 percent. The highest numbers of underweight children in these areas were in the 12-35 month age group, with a slight reduction in those aged 36 to 59 months. Malnutrition among girls is 42 percent and 50 percent for boys.

The North and East were where bloody fighting took place between the Sri Lankan military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) during the past five years. The Mullaithivu and Kilinochchi districts were excluded from the survey. In the final months before the LTTE's defeat in May 2009, the Sri Lankan military bombarded these districts ruthlessly, killing thousands of Tamil civilians and forcing hundreds of thousands into ever smaller areas.

After the war about 280,000 Tamils were detained in military-controlled camps. While about 60,000 remain in these camps, others have been sent to Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu without proper housing or healthcare assistance programs. Food supplies in these areas were limited or completely halted during the war, paving the way for widespread poverty and hunger.

While the malnutrition figures are lower in other parts of Sri Lanka, the situation is nevertheless alarming. According to a recently released 2006-07 Demographic and Health Survey, which excluded the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka, found the national average of underweight babies was 17 percent and the figure had not improved since the last survey.

The highest numbers of underweight babies were born to mothers in Sri Lanka's plantation districts. Thirty-one percent of children from these areas were born underweight, a 10 percent increase on survey conducted in 2000, with the highest numbers recorded in Nuwara Eliya and Badulla districts. For Nuwara Eliya the figure was 33.8 percent, and in Badulla 21.9 percent.

These figures are not accidental. Estate workers are amongst the lowest paid workers in Sri Lanka. According to official statistics, poverty among plantation workers increased 56 percent between 1991 and 2006.

Diarrhoea, acute respiratory infections, malaria and other illnesses causing fever are widespread among children under the age of five throughout Sri Lanka. The prevalence of fever among children between 6-11 months is 22.8 percent, and 21.5 percent among children 12-23 months.

A Nutrition and Food Security Assessment Survey issued by UNICEF and World Food Program (WFP) on June 8 confirmed the same general trends. The survey

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was carried out in nine districts—rural, estate and urban—and among those considered the most economically vulnerable.

The report reveals that households spent 37.9 percent of their monthly income on food and 43.6 percent on productive assets (i.e., for income-generating activities), with nearly a third of households forced to borrow money for their purchases. According to the survey, 32 percent of the households "did not have enough food" at least once during the previous 12 months. The figure was 55.9 percent in the estate sector.

The UNICEF-WFP report reveals that 39.1 percent of households had a monthly income less than 9,000 Sri Lankan rupees ($US79). Almost 60 percent of Jaffna district households were in the lowest income category, 55 percent in Badulla and 51.7 percent in Ratnapura. It found that 0.5 percent of the households were "severely food insecure", 11.8 percent "moderately food insecure" and 87.6 percent "food secure".

The prevalence of anaemia was 16.2 percent among pregnant women, 19.6 percent among lactating women and 21.7 among non-pregnant and non-lactating women. Almost 20 percent of Sri Lankan children in the 0-59 month age group were stunted, 11.7 wasted and 21.6 percent underweight. Stunting in the Nuwara Eliya, Badulla and Ratnapura districts was 40.9 percent, 23.9 percent and 21.6 percent respectively. The Colombo district figure was 17.4 percent.

The UNICEF-WFP report concluded that the high percentage of households living on "borrowed food and reduced meals as a coping strategy", and prevalence of anaemia among women and malnutrition among the preschool children, were serious public health issues. The government, however, has no solutions to these acute problems.

The government, the UN and various corporations recently launched a fund-raising campaign focussing on "eradicating child malnutrition". On June 6, Economic Development Minister Basil Rajapakse, Education Minister Bandula Gunawardena, various UN agencies, and representatives from TNT Express and Unilever carried out a promotional train journey from Colombo to a suburban town.

This campaign is a fraud, however, designed to divert attention from preparations for severe austerity measures in the budget due at the end of this month. Faced with International Monetary Fund demands to halve the budget deficit, the government will slash social spending and increase taxes. As a result, poverty and the acute health problems facing the Sri Lankan masses will only worsen.

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