

More Colombo families targetted for eviction

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Shanty dwellers living near the Grand Pass canal in north Colombo were told by government officials on May 31 that all structures within six and a half metres of the canal bank would be removed. Residents were given tokens carrying the stamp of the Land Reclamation and Development Board.

The families are naturally anxious and angry. They were not told whether they would be evicted from their homes or when. Police and soldiers accompanied the officials, only heightening fears that demolitions are planned. About 50 houses and 160 families are likely to be affected.

Following flooding in Colombo in mid-May, President Mahinda Rajapakse ordered that authorities remove shanties from the city's canal banks. Irrigation Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva announced that the operation would be coordinated with the defence ministry. The flooding, however, is just a pretext to press ahead with broader slum clearance plans. (See: "Sri Lankan government plans extensive slum clearance evictions".)

The area near the Grand Pass canal is low lying and floods virtually every year. The canal itself has badly silted and only now is the Reclamation Board dredging it. Residents told the WSWs that the municipal authorities and the Reclamation Board had shown no concern for them in the past. During last month's flooding, water rose by about a metre, forcing residents to seek refuge in local temples and schools for four days.

The residents pointed to the government's double standards. While they were being told that their houses were too close to the canal, a private company on the other bank has buildings within the 6.5 metre limit. Yet

it has not been given notice to move.

The area is known as Stadium Village. It was established in 1983 after the then United National Party government cleared shanties to build Sugathadasa Stadium, the country's largest sports stadium. People were moved to temporary wooden huts, then more permanent structures—243 in all. But as families expanded and more people moved in, they built homes closer to the canal.

The housing area has no proper roads or lanes. Mud holes can be seen everywhere. There is only about a metre between houses. Dirty water flows in open drains, which are a breeding ground for mosquitoes. In most houses, there are several families. The dwellings are constructed out of cement bricks, with tin sheeting for a roof. Some have a small sitting room, a kitchen and a toilet, but most are smaller.

When they were moved to Stadium Village, residents were told they would be given legal titles. But 27 years later, they have received no documents, even though they have to pay 50 rupees for municipal council rates.

Nicholas was among those shifted in 1983. He had a good house but was forced to move. "Now, we are facing floods every year," he said. "I was given 60,000 rupees as compensation for the house and land but it was not adequate. These brick houses have been built on two-perch land (about 50 square metres). We only got water after some time. The government gave us the houses, but we had to pay for electricity and water connections."

His wife Hilda explained: "When we shifted here our children were small. I have five. Now the children are grown up and married. Three of my sons have built

small houses in front of ours. There are many families like this. People need places to live.

“My husband worked at the port in those days, but his salary was not enough to feed five children. I had a small shop to earn something. Later I went abroad. Many women went abroad as housemaids. That helped us. Now I work three days a week at a newspaper office. The children help me but I need some money in my hand.

“We expected that we would receive some relief after the end of the war [against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam]. Now we are aged. I am 61. My husband is 67. The government should provide relief to people by reducing the prices. Doctors advise us to eat nutritious food. How can we do that?”

Hilda angrily referred to President Rajapakse’s declaration during the January presidential election that he was going to turn Sri Lanka into the new Asian miracle. “Before making the country a miracle, they have to stop people going hungry. Is the miracle going to mean chasing people out of Colombo? They want our votes. But after the election we are becoming unauthorised people!”

Hilda expressed revulsion over the eviction of families from Slave Island. She also commented on the fact that 60,000 Tamil civilians had remained detained since the war ended last May. “It is sad,” she said. “Even when the officials came to see the canal, the army and police also came along. Was that to warn us?!”

Another woman explained: “We have 13 in our family. I have 4 children and 2 of them are married. They all live with us. The government has not told us whether we will be given an alternative place if the houses are demolished. We cannot buy a land or rent a house as our income is day by day.”

Romesh, who is married with two children, said: “My parents were given a house in 1983 in Stadium Village. When I married it was not enough for us, so I was settled here. Now we have been here for more than 10 years. If they demolish structures as they have planned,

half of my house, including the kitchen, will go. We don’t know if they plan to demolish the whole of our house.

“I work at a private institution in Colombo. I earn less than 15,000 rupees [\$US132] per month with all allowances. My wife has no job. With the present cost of living, you cannot manage on such an income. We need about 3,000 rupees for meals, just for a week. A coconut is 35 rupees. We have to spend 1,700 rupees for gas monthly.”

“I supported the present government, but they are doing many things against the people. They promised relief for people after the war. They won the war and now they are trying to suppress people, using the security forces here.”



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