

The flood crises in Sri Lanka and Australia

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Severe flooding in Sri Lanka and Australia, caused by the same regional La Niña weather pattern, has had devastating consequences in both countries. More than a million people have been affected by the floods triggered by torrential rains in Sri Lanka, particularly in the eastern districts of Batticaloa and Ampara. In Australia, thousands of people have had their homes inundated by flood waters, especially in the north eastern state of Queensland and its capital, Brisbane.

At first sight, the circumstances seem quite different. Sri Lanka is an economically backward country that has suffered a quarter century of communal war and a destructive tsunami in December 2004, and lacks very basic infrastructure. Australia is a large developed economy, with modern facilities and access to sophisticated technology.

However, in both countries governments have proven utterly incapable of forewarning and protecting ordinary people from major, yet predictable, adverse weather events. While the impact of natural forces of such scope and strength pose major challenges, the social and economic consequences have been vastly compounded by the subordination of every aspect of life, including land management, town planning, water supply and emergency services, to the dictates of corporate profit.

There are crucial common features: government spending cuts, poor or decaying infrastructure, the privatisation or commercialisation of basic services, profit-driven land and real estate development, inadequate emergency services and pitiful levels of official relief and compensation for flood victims. These are not simply the result of indifference and neglect, but flow from definite decisions made in the interests of the business elites.

The social consequences are more glaring in Sri Lanka because of the dire poverty of many of the victims, the lack of elementary preventative measures

and infrastructure, and the massive diversion of resources by successive governments into the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Many of the 350,000 people forced to leave their homes and live in ill-prepared evacuation camps were also displaced during the 25-year war and the 2004 tsunami. Some of the squalid camps have become flooded themselves, forcing people to flee again. Poorly-maintained reservoirs have burst their banks, deluging farms. Most of the 23 officially-recorded deaths have resulted from mudslides, usually caused by deforestation and the building of houses on the sides of hills, due to the lack of land and proper government planning. The government's disaster plan basically consists of sending the army back to areas where two or three years ago it was indiscriminately shelling LTTE strongholds, killing hundreds, if not thousands, of Tamil civilians.

Yet what has happened in Australia since the flood crisis began in mid-December is in many ways more revealing. Despite the availability of advanced technology and telecommunications, ordinary citizens have been left to face the elements without proper warnings and with scant assistance, except from volunteers. Large portions of the riverside suburbs of Brisbane, the country's third largest city, a major metropolis with more than two million people, have been inundated. Cities, towns and small communities across Queensland and in some other states have either been flooded or cut off by floodwaters for days. Major mines, factories, roads, railways, ports and airports have been paralysed, at great economic and social cost.

There have been terrible scenes of people being swept away by flash floods, or pleading helplessly from car and house roofs for rescue, or forced to abandon their homes without possessions at the last minute. Evidence has emerged that governments have for years ignored and suppressed reports and warnings by meteorologists

and engineers about dams that cannot withstand maximum floods, unchecked property development in flood-prone areas and cutbacks to flood mitigation programs. Decisions have been dominated by the drive to boost investors' profits, including the transformation of the south east Queensland agency responsible for dams, water supply and flood mitigation into a commercially operated, money-making corporation.

By any objective measure, this represents a monumental failure of government and the current economic system. Flooding is still continuing in various parts of the country, and more is likely before the four-month wet season ends. The social and economic costs will be immense as people try to rebuild their lives. Numerous homes and small businesses are not covered for flood insurance, which most insurers either refuse to provide or offer as an expensive optional extra. Given the paltry character of government grants, many people, as in Sri Lanka, will be struggling to recover by relying on their own resources and the generosity of friends, relatives and volunteer services.

The Australian Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard, like its Sri Lankan counterpart headed by President Mahinda Rajapakse, has declared that any reconstruction spending will have to be offset by other government cuts. Gillard has insisted that her pledge to the financial markets to eliminate the post-2008 budget deficit by 2013 will still be met, warning that "tough choices" will be involved. Rajapakse is committed to meeting the demand of the International Monetary Fund for a halving of the 2009 budget deficit by 2012. In both countries, for all the official talk of "national unity" and "pulling together," this means imposing the burden of the floods crisis directly onto the backs of working people.

These issues are by no means confined to Sri Lanka and Australia. More than 500 people have been killed this week by flooding and mudslides in mountainous areas near Rio de Janeiro in south-eastern Brazil, where governments had failed to properly control construction. Floods and unusually cold weather have caused havoc across Europe and North America in recent weeks. Millions of destitute people in Pakistan and Haiti are still waiting in vain for relief and rebuilding assistance following floods and earthquakes in 2010.

These are symptoms of a decrepit economic and social order, increasingly unable to provide even the most basic protections and services to ordinary people. Having bailed out the banks and finance houses that caused the global financial meltdown that began in 2008, governments around the world, including those in Sri Lanka and Australia, are now imposing austerity measures that will only worsen the situation. For humanity to find a way forward, a new revolutionary socialist leadership is required, one capable of implementing a globally-coordinated program to reconstruct society completely along rationally planned, democratic and egalitarian lines, harnessing all the scientific and technological resources now available to avert and manage the worst effects of extreme natural events.

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