

On the spot report

Sri Lanka's flood victims express anger over government's lack of aid

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The reality on the ground in Sri Lanka's flood-affected areas is vastly different from the sanitised view being presented in television footage. The news programs show government ministers and parliamentarians with smiling faces, parading before the cameras and distributing food items and clothes to victims. Behind the scenes, however, there is widespread anger and fury among the flood victims toward the government and its neglect.

Two weeks of floods have affected more than one million people. Around 300,000 people have been displaced in 11 of the country's 25 districts. By Monday, the official death toll had risen to 40, and another 51 were reported seriously injured. Nearly 25,000 houses were completely destroyed or partially damaged, and crops across about 400,000 acres (160,000 hectares) have been ruined.

The Disaster Management Centre reported that as of Monday afternoon 58,000 people were still being housed in makeshift camps—down from the previous figure. Many have returned to their homes as the flood waters have receded. The government has forced others to leave some camps set up in schools, including in the worst affected areas—the Batticaloa and Amparai districts of Eastern Province—to allow the schools to recommence.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with Tamil and Muslim people at Kathankudy, Navalady, Sithandy, Uppodai and Kangeyanoodai, and some villagers in Arayampathy. Most were fishermen and paddy cultivators. Many fled the floods only to return to find their small huts and homes washed away or damaged, along with their belongings.

Eastern Province was hard hit by the civil war

between Sri Lankan government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). When the government restarted the war in 2006, many villagers fled and were allowed to return only after the LTTE's defeat in May 2009. They received no aid from the government to rebuild their lives. Some of the villages were also badly damaged by the catastrophic tsunami in December 2004.

Kathankudy is situated six kilometres from the town of Batticaloa. Behind Kathankudy town is a village where people live in utterly impoverished conditions. Around 400 families have been affected by the floods. The area is near the Batticaloa Lagoon and most residents are fishermen or do odd jobs for a living. About a month ago, the fisheries corporation banned them from using fishing nets, but they were given no alternative.

At one point during the flooding, the area was submerged in eight feet of water. The fishermen lost their boats as well as their nets. Most of the houses situated close to the lagoon bank have been badly damaged and household items have been lost. A Red Cross Society doctor working in the area told the WSWs that he had treated more than 10 cases of diarrhoea. Most people have skin eruptions and respiratory diseases. He explained: "For the time being we will be able to manage with the simple medication available, but there is a danger of major outbreaks of other illnesses, including mosquito-borne diseases."

Local people said they had not received anything from the government, apart from a kilogram of rice, 250 grams of dhal, 125 grams of sugar, and a small quantity of coconut oil. Non-governmental organisations are helping to provide basic food rations.

At the adjoining village of Arayampathy, fishermen told a similar story. All of their fishing equipment and coir (coconut husk harvested by local women) had been washed away by flooding. Since the rain started three weeks ago, they have had no work.

Nagalingam, 40, told the WSWs: “A Tamil MP visited here after the flood and said that he could not walk to see the worst-affected area. But during the election he walked to every house. After the war, the only change is that we can walk somewhat more freely—but our life is more difficult as the prices of essential food items have gone up.”

The next village is Kangeyanoodai, where around 830 families live. They were affected badly as their homes are situated very close to the lagoon. “We did not receive any relief except from charities,” one person explained.

One school is still without toilet facilities, while others have also been damaged. Facilities were limited even before the floods, with a shortage of teachers in the area. There is only one school up to advanced level and even there the subjects available are limited. One young person said: “All the Muslim leaders are with the government. Whoever comes to power in Colombo, they side with them, saying Muslim people can get help by joining the government. But these MPs get the benefits, not the poor like us.”

Almost all these villages have very bad roads. Many residents told the WSWs that the flooding was caused by the absence of proper drainage and planning. Others expressed anger over the inadequate sums announced by the government for rebuilding. One person said: “We face these floods every three years. We only came to know through you about the amount of compensation the government is going to give us. If they give just 25,000 rupees (\$US225) to repair houses how can they be rebuilt? It is not enough.”

Describing the war, one resident said: “We left this village for six months to go to Kathankudy during the war. Our houses have been broken into and robbed. We did not receive any compensation from the government. We just earn 500 or 600 rupees a day from fishing. But it is not enough to cope. Because of the ban on fishing nets, we don’t have jobs. We live on what we receive from the camp. The government has not given anything.”

Muhammad Thambi, 62, said: “About 1,000 people are affected here. Some people lost their houses and other assets. Fishing nets and boats have damaged. Some houses have been damaged from the bottom up, with kitchens and other rooms destroyed by the floods. Private individuals gave us lot of help, including mats, tents and blankets.”

At Navaldy village in Kallady, people had been sheltering in a school, but returned to their homes or were staying with relatives after being forced to vacate. People were cooking at a church as they could not cook in their homes due to flood damage. Deputy ministers Mohammed Hizbullah and V. Muralitharan (also known as Karuna) had recently visited the area, but did nothing to alleviate the people’s suffering.

When the WSWs visited Uppodai, people were cooking at a Kovil (Hindu temple). The wells were contaminated with flood water, but people had no alternative but to drink from them. Thousands of people from this area were killed in the 2004 tsunami, and large numbers of women were widowed by the disaster and also by the civil war. After the tsunami, people were given small houses by non-government organisations, but the government provided no extra aid.

Last week, thousands of people protested over two days outside the office of Arayampathy’s divisional secretary. They denounced the government for not providing relief to the needy, and accused politicians of diverting relief to their sympathisers. Such political corruption is routine in Sri Lanka.

A teacher, who was also a flood victim, explained that about 150 people, including children, staged a protest as they had not received any meals for a day. “The president has said that government officers should provide everything to flood victims, without considering regulations,” he said. “But how can one do that without money and materials?”



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