

Sri Lanka: Storm kills dozens of fishermen

Our correspondents
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At least 50 fishermen died as a result of a storm that hit Sri Lanka's southwestern coastal area last Saturday. More bodies of dead fishermen were recovered from the sea on Tuesday. The death toll may rise as 17 persons were still missing as of Wednesday.

The homes of fishing families at Beruwala, Balapitiya and Hikkaduwa in the south, and Dehiwela, Ratmalana and Moratuwa in the western province, were also badly affected. According to the disaster management department, some 1,433 persons have been displaced, 107 houses completely destroyed and 2,228 homes damaged.

Speaking to the WSWs, angry fishermen condemned the government for not providing a proper early warning system and safety facilities. Though the storm was a natural disaster, many lives could have been saved if people had been alerted in advance.

The director of the meteorology department, Sunil Jayasekera, told reporters that his institute sent a warning to all agencies about weather conditions last Saturday. But he admitted that the department lacked sophisticated technology to observe sudden changes of the weather. His deputy, Lalith Chandrapala, said the department was also short-staffed by 17 meteorologists and 77 technical officers, making it difficult to cope with storm events.

The government immediately blamed meteorology department officials and washed its hands of responsibility. Its evasion was so blatant that an editorial in the *Island* stated: "What usually happens is that politicians employ such tactics to assuage and divert public anger at the expense of state officials and pigeonhole probe reports." The media establishment is concerned that the disaster has added to the increasing anti-government discontent.

The government made some face-saving gestures. As is usual, President Mahinda Rajapakse appointed a committee to investigate the disaster and whether

lapses occurred in the meteorology department. He offered compensation of just 100,000 rupees (\$US800) to the families of those who died, plus 15,000 rupees for funeral expenses.

After the December 2004 Asian tsunami disaster, Rajapakse's predecessor, Chandrika Kumaratunga, pledged to establish a weather warning system. However, this system has not yet been tested to assess its effectiveness. Fishermen were badly affected by the tsunami, which killed nearly 40,000 people in Sri Lanka.

In 2011, the government promised to allocate funds to modernise the meteorology department. However, Disaster Management Minister Mahinda Amaraweera admitted the plan was put off to 2014. This postponement is the result of government spending cutbacks.

When WSWs reporters went to the Kadalmaththa area of Dehiwela on Monday, hundreds of people had gathered to see whether further bodies would be found. Kadamaththa consists of a narrow coastal strip, about three kilometres long.

About 1,000 families live in the area, between the sea and a railway line. Most of their houses are built with wooden planks. They have no basic facilities, such as running water and sanitation. The majority earn a living by fishing. Others sell vegetables or do odd jobs.

Fishermen are among poorest layers of Sri Lankan society. Typically, three fishermen go to sea in a small fibre boat fitted with an engine. About 7,000 rupees must be spent on fuel and food. After allowances for fuel, fishing gear and nets, half the day's income goes to the boat owner. Their monthly income varies from 10,000 to 12,000 rupees, depending on the catch.

We spoke to the widow of Sudath Rohana, who died in the storm. They have three children. Rohana had lost his house during the 2004 tsunami, and moved to a small house in Panadura, about eight kilometres away.

Because it was difficult for him to travel every day, he lived in a room at a community centre in the fishing village. His wife said they lived a difficult life and the future would be worse now that he had died.

Fisherman Wimalasiri survived the storm. “We narrowly escaped and returned to the shore with great difficulty. Most died because their boats hit against rocks in the access passage from the shore to the deep sea. We have been demanding the widening of this access passage for years. We raised this demand with the president [Rajapakse] before, when he was fisheries minister. Nothing happened,” he explained.

Wimalasiri added: “This government builds roads for the beautification of towns, and spends money building airports, but does nothing to protect the lives of ordinary people.”

Another fisherman Munasighe Rajapakse explained that he had gone to sea last Saturday and survived, but workmate Thilak Upathissa had died. “We didn’t get any catch that day. The waves became rough. Suddenly our boat went up and turned upside down. Upathissa was trapped inside.”

Rajapakse commented: “The government now claims to provide protective gear for all fishermen and will fine us if we fail to wear them. But we don’t receive any subsidy, and the fuel subsidy has also been cut.”

Fishermen said they could not afford safety equipment, even though the government blames them for not using it. The price of a set light—a piece of fisheries communication equipment—recently increased from 17,000 to 30,000 rupees.

Fishermen from Balapitiya told the WSWS that if the government had taken action and warnings had been issued last Friday night, many lives could have been saved. Most people died because their boats capsized near the shore on their return.

R.G. Karunaratna, the chairman of the Rural Fisheries Society in Balapitiya, said: “Six fishermen drowned before our own eyes. Four boats, which came next, capsized near the harbour. Three [people] managed to reach the shore.”

Another reason for the high casualty rate was the lack of a harbour with advanced communication equipment and other facilities. When President Rajapakse was fisheries minister, he promised to build a harbour at Balapitiya but only the foundation stone was laid.

Fishermen are forced to risk their lives because of

their poverty. Nilmini Nilanka, now a widow with three children after her husband died in the storm, explained: “He did not have a proper job for months. Our family was starving most of the time. Some days we had to borrow money or take loans on high interest rates to meet our day-to-day expenses. I have no idea how we can live without him.”

The government’s callous disregard for the wellbeing of working people stems from its drive to implement the austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund on behalf of the corporate elite. The lack of proper safety measures for fishermen, including a storm warning system, is one aspect of its broader agenda of slashing public spending on jobs and essential services.



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