

# Sri Lankan government continues evictions of Colombo's poor

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The Sri Lankan government, which plans to convert Colombo City into a “South Asian commercial hub,” is expediting its evictions of residents. In order to attract investors and tourists, it has also started developing several other cities and coastal areas.

The Urban Development Authority (UDA) forcibly demolished 15 houses last month near the Slave Island railway station in central Colombo, with the help of the security forces. It is estimated that 119 more families and three businesses have been given notice, but have refused to leave.

Most families facing eviction earn their living doing odd jobs, while some others are government workers and small businessmen. Many have been living in the area for decades. Small houses are built on tiny plots of land, each about two perches (one perch equals 25 square metres). As compensation, they have been offered just 18,000 rupees (\$US137) a month per family for rent, and only for 18 months.

The government's Board of Investment has signed an agreement with Imperial Builders, a Pakistani company, to develop 1.4 hectares of land in the area. Work on the project has been started, with the UDA assuring the company that other families will be moved. The project includes luxury condominiums featuring facilities such as swimming pools, gymnasiums, clubs, restaurants, a playground and a 4-star hotel.

The families being evicted do not believe the government's promise of houses in the condominium after the project is finished. According to the families, the Pakistani company bought the land at 4 million rupees (\$US30,400) a perch.

A woman told the WSW: “We had two perches of land. So we demanded 8 million rupees for our land, but the authorities refused. Then how can we trust them

when they say they will provide us with luxury apartments?”

Several of the 15 families who accepted the 18,000 rupees in monthly rent also spoke to the WSW. They are now living about 6 kilometres away, and must travel to their old area to do odd jobs such as selling snacks from their carts. One person said he regretted leaving the place. “We found small places to live. We could not find schools for our children yet. Life is difficult.”

The government has failed to provide permanent houses for some families who were evicted from Slave Island in 2008. About 400 families were removed and 76 are still living in makeshift houses at Weligoda Watta, several kilometres from Slave Island.

One resident explained: “We haven't got permanent jobs. We are doing odd jobs such as fishing. Women are working as housemaids and have to travel by two or three buses to workplaces. It is difficult.”

Evicted dwellers from Ibba Watta, another slum area, have had a similar fate. They are living in small wooden huts in the Nagalagam Street camp at Totalanga, a Colombo suburb. They have not been paid compensation, receiving only an empty promise of permanent housing in the future. They are still waiting for the UDA to provide houses.

The UDA has placed security personnel in the area and camp residents have been warned not to speak to the media. “There are 65 families here,” one person said. “There are only 18 toilets equally allocated for males and females. Some toilets are not functioning properly. We have to use a common water line.”

Under the Colombo metropolitan development project, President Mahinda Rajapakse's government plans to evict about 70,000 slum dwellers in Colombo and surrounding suburbs. Since 2008 the government

has evicted more than 1,000 families from different areas of the city, using the armed forces to suppress any resistance.

According to the Defence Ministry and UDA web site: “There are about 135,000 families dwelling in 68,812 houses [in the Colombo area]. Out of those approximately 54,000 are children (below the age of 14). Owing to the low literacy rate, most of them are unemployed or under employed.”

The UDA has issued notices to hundreds of other families in Colombo suburbs, including Narahenpita, Barnes Place, Borella, Bauddhaloka Mawatha, Wanathamulla and Maligawatta.

In 2010, the UDA and the Land Reclamation and Development Board were taken over by the Defence Ministry, which is under Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, one of the president’s brothers.

Some 1,400 families at Apple Watta in central Colombo have also been given notices to vacate their places. The UDA has offered those families a small amount of compensation and a 3 by 3 metre hut at Weligoda Watta, or 8,000 rupees a month for rent. They have refused the offer, knowing the dire conditions in which their evicted neighbours live.

Three years ago, 24 houses in this area were demolished and the families were sent to temporary wooden huts at Weligoda Watta. They still do not have permanent housing.

The 1,400 families filed a case against eviction. The Supreme Court passed judgment on July 11, restricting the UDA from demolishing the houses “until the occupants were relocated”. But this only buys a little time, while the UDA pressures people, including by using the security forces, to leave their homes.

Most families in Apple Watta live in small huts built with wooden planks and roofed with tin sheets. The huts are packed together with narrow lanes, without basic facilities such as clean drinking water and health services. The area has only 12 toilets. The houses are often inundated when local canals overflow during the rainy season.

Recent developments underscore the fact that people are being forced out of their homes to provide land for investors.

The government has provided 2.4 hectares of land from Slave Island to the Indian-based TATA Housing Development Company, which has pledged to invest

\$406 million. The UDA has ordered 456 families and 90 commercial property owners to vacate the area designated for the project.

The *Sunday Times* on June 30 reported that the government gave a prime property in Colombo to the Chinese Avic International Corporation for an investment project worth \$300 million.

Beyond Colombo City, the government has planned development projects in other cities and coastal areas. Recently, the UDA demolished 44 houses at Dambulla in Central Province and the owners of another 64 houses have been issued with notices to vacate.

Driving this ruthless eviction program is the impact of the global economic crisis on Sri Lanka. The Rajapakse government is desperate to attract foreign investment and tourists as a means to earn foreign exchange.



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