

A million people hit by drought in rural Sri Lanka

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27 September 2014

More than one million Sri Lankans, or almost 120,000 families, have been seriously affected by a six-month drought in eight districts. These areas include Polonnaruwa, Hambantota, Moneragala, Ampara and Vavuniya, in the North Central, Southern, Uva, Eastern and Northern provinces respectively.

While President Mahinda Rajapakse claims that his government is assisting the peasantry, this lie is exposed by the meagre drought-relief payments provided to farmers.

Last month the government announced a 1.9 billion-rupee relief package. This amounts to about 2,000 rupees (\$US15) per person. During the recent Uva Provincial Council election campaign, the government, in an attempt to deflect mounting anger, announced 2,500-rupee drought payment for families in Moneragala.

World Socialist Web Site reporters recently visited the drought-stricken villages of Damsopura, Thalakolawewa, Medirigiriya and Bisobandara in Polonnaruwa district. Most residents are poor paddy rice and chena (slash-and-burn) cultivators. Farmers and youth voiced their opposition to their shabby treatment by the government.

Damsopura is a typical village of about 400 families, with many half-built brick homes. Residents are involved in slash-and-burn highland cultivation of maize and other cereals and depend on high annual rainfall. The size of areas suitable for farming has gradually decreased as land has been distributed among each generation of the families.

S.M. Ranbanda, a chena farmer, said: “We have not received rain since March. This has severely hit our living but so far we’ve only received from the government a 1,500-rupee bag of essential items.”

He explained that water distribution to the village had only begun three months ago. “Every other day a water bowser comes with five to six barrels. Families might receive one or two bottles of drinking water that are sent

as donations from concerned people.”

Ranbanda has suffered from kidney disease for eight years. He said hospitals lacked sufficient supplies of drugs to treat the disease, forcing patients to buy their own from pharmacies. Thousands of people suffer from kidney disease in the North Central province (see: “Chronic kidney disease spreads in rural Sri Lanka”).

Peasants in Polonnaruwa district usually cultivate their lands over two seasons each year, called Maha and Yala. The Maha cultivation requires rainfall from the northeast monsoon, which usually begins in September. The Yala cultivation uses rain stored in tanks or artificial lakes. Last year’s northeast monsoon produced little rain, so tank water was also scarce.

Most Damsopura residents live below the poverty line, with many dependent on the government’s Samurdhi welfare program, a meagre monthly cash payment.

Samurdhi payments were begun about two decades ago to deflect mounting discontent among poverty-stricken villagers. Successive governments have systematically reduced the amounts. Those receiving payments also have to perform “community work,” such as clearing roads and cleaning canals.

Jayantha Padmasiri, another farmer, said: “Groups have been formed in our villages for community work under the Samurdhi program. We work for 500 rupees per day but the work has been restricted to 12 days. We are supposed to receive 6,000 rupees (\$US46) for this, but it hasn’t been paid for months.

“I’ve obtained loans of 75,000 rupees (\$US575) from the Samurdhi bank. But I haven’t been unable to pay them back because I’ve insufficient income and if this situation continues, we will face legal action.

“Although the government and media claim we are looked after, none of the ruling party politicians come here. And because our peasants can’t cultivate paddy lands, we’ve been forced to buy rice.

“The government told us to be patient and things would improve after the war [the 30-year communal conflict against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)]. But five years have elapsed since the end of the war and none of our problems have been addressed.”

Even before the drought, safe drinking water was rare because local water supplies have been contaminated by the excessive use of agricultural chemical products. Even during high rainfall periods, the water supply is insufficient. People have to walk several kilometres every day to fetch water. With kidney disease reaching epidemic levels, people are forced to buy filtered water, which costs between two and four rupees per litre.

Talakolawewa, another drought-affected village, has 180 families. Only 120 have paddy land for growing rice. One mother of four children explained her plight. “There are four members in our family but all of us only have 3.5 acres of paddy land,” she said.

“To prepare an acre of paddy land for cultivation you have to spend 8,000 rupees. A bag of fertiliser costs 1,300 rupees, even at subsidised rates, and herbicides cost 2,300 rupees per acre. To cultivate all our land costs even more. To harvest our crops costs 8,500 rupees per acre but our total harvest from an acre is about 65 bushels (1,365 kilograms).

“Although the government has guaranteed to pay 32 rupees per kilogram we can’t sell all our produce to state authorities, and private buyers pay only 28 rupees a kilo. This means that most of the time we’re unable to get back what we’ve spent.”

Some people have pawned their jewellery. The woman said she received only 615 rupees per month from the Samurdhi benefit and her mother suffers from kidney disease. Every family in Talakolawewa has at least one person with kidney ailments. Treatment is difficult because the village has no public transport. People have to walk about four kilometres to catch a bus to the city.

Anuradha, a 22-year-old girl from Medirigiriya, explained her plight. “I sat for my Advanced Level examination two years ago. I did my higher college studies in the Medirigiriya National School,” she said.

“My ambition was to get admission into a College of Education [teacher training college] but I had to give up that idea because the authorities decided to only enrol those who did the new syllabus. I am now trying to become a nurse.”

“Future prospects for young people are becoming increasingly bleak. And regarding the drought, none of this area’s politicians have attempted to see what has

happened to us, let alone address our grievances.”

The opposition right-wing United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) have shed crocodile tears about the plight of drought-affected people and criticised the government’s inadequate relief.

These parties, however, have the same record as the Rajapakse government. When the UNP was in power it slashed subsidies to farmers and increased the cost of basic farm inputs. The ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and UNP are both backed by rice mill owners and protect big companies.

While JVP postures as a protector of farmers, it entered a coalition with the SLFP in 2004 and agreed to implement the cost-cutting measures of the International Monetary Fund. It backed the Rajapakse government’s austerity measures and the war against the LTTE.

The drought has affected almost 84,000 hectares, or 13 percent of Sri Lanka’s total paddy land, with the loss of rice production estimated at about 280,000 metric tonnes.

In the drought-affected districts, 44 percent of paddy farmers took out loans in the last Yala season but only 27 percent were able to repay them. In the Maha season only 18 percent of those who borrowed money were able to settle their debts.

These deteriorating conditions and the lack of cultivatable lands have driven most young villagers to seek work in cities, particularly in the Western Province, where government and private companies have launched infrastructure projects. Young people have become cheap labour for these ventures. The latest drought further demonstrates that the situation facing the rural masses cannot be resolved under the capitalist profit system.

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