

# Sri Lanka: About 200 killed in landslide

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In the biggest natural disaster in Sri Lanka since the 2004 tsunami, about 200 people were killed on Wednesday in a major landslide in the Meeriyabedda Estate, Koslanda, about 200 kilometres from Colombo. A dozen bodies have been recovered and many more are still missing, buried under mud and earth.

The landslide occurred in the tea estate around 7.45 a.m. and destroyed a strip of land about one kilometre wide where about 150 families of plantation workers were living. Seven “lines”—long buildings divided into 20 small living quarters or “line rooms”—were flattened. A Hindu temple and two milk collecting centres were also engulfed.

Torrential rain was the immediate reason for landslide. The whole island is experiencing heavy monsoon rains, bringing the danger of floods.

At the time of the landslide, most children had left for school and some adults had gone to work. Otherwise several hundred more people would have perished. When the children returned from school, they found that their homes no longer existed and their relatives were missing or dead. The children have been taken to two government schools—the Punagala and Koslanda Tamil Vidyalayas.

WSWS reporters went to the area yesterday.

Indrakumari, who witnessed the disaster, explained: “We do not live in this area. But that morning I went to see one of my aunties who lived in a line house that was destroyed. When I was walking toward her house I heard a huge noise and saw a yellow dust cloud. At the same time I saw the earth coming down. I took my child and ran. Shortly after, there was no house to be seen.”

The government announced that 500 soldiers had been deployed carry out rescue operations. However, only 12 bodies had been recovered by Wednesday evening. The disaster management ministry announced the search for people buried was halted due to bad weather conditions.

The WSWs reporters observed soldiers and police hanging around two inadequate excavators. No bodies were found on Thursday. However, people were waiting at the disaster site in heavy rain for news of their loved

ones. Many were in tears. The health facilities are inadequate to cater for the needs of the affected people. The rain is continuing and threatens to cause disease.

The government is already trying to shift the blame. Disaster Management Minister Mahinda Amaraweera claimed that people in the area had been warned to shift because of the danger of landslides. Some people told the WSWs that they did not know about a warning. Others said that they could not move because they had not alternative accommodation.

Plantation Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe pointed the finger at the estate management, saying that landslide warnings had been issued in 2011 but were ignored. According to the National Building Research Organisation, permanent evacuation notices had been issued to 75 families since 2005 and resettlement options identified but the estate owners had not complied.

While the area has been known to be disaster prone for nearly a decade, successive governments have taken no action to either adequately warn estate workers, or force the estate owners to move their employees. Plantation workers, who are among the most oppressed layers of the Sri Lankan working class, are in no position to simply move. They are tied to their estates and live in line rooms provided by the owners.

Prior to this latest tragedy, similar disasters have taken place in the central hills district country during the past two decades. Haldummulla, Koslanda and Beragala are particularly prone to landslides. The Tamil plantation workers are compelled to live with the risks because they have no alternative.

The tragedy has shocked the public. With an election likely to be called in January, President Mahinda Rajapakse toured the area yesterday in a bid to display his sympathy. During the visit, he promised to resettle the survivors in a new housing scheme.

Likewise Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of the opposition United National Party (UNP), issued a statement saying that everyone should help the victims “irrespective of party and other affiliations.” However,

such expressions of concern by the ruling and opposition parties will quickly be forgotten, leaving the affected people to their fate.

Kumar, who was displaced by the landslide, told the WSWs: “In fact we were not informed of this kind of serious risk. Even if we were informed, we could do nothing. Where do we have to go?”

“The government invests billions to beautify cities like Colombo and construct expressways. It is investing this amount of large money for rich people and has neglected us totally, knowing well that we are prone to this kind of disaster. Now the president comes to see and promises to provide a new village. We know that these are election manoeuvres.”

Kumara said that the government officials have advised residents to shift. But the only place they could go was to the homes of relatives, most of whom are plantation workers. “The whole area of our line room is about 150 square feet. In such a house around five family members live. So, how can another family live there?”

President Rajapakse has ordered Arumugam Thondaman, a minister and leader of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), to go to the disaster site to look after the survivors.

The CWC is a political party that also functions as a trade union for plantation workers. It is widely despised for serving the interests of the government and plantation companies and for its suppression of the struggles of workers for better pay and conditions.

Workers told the WSWs that they would not allow Thondaman into the area because there had been repeated disasters and the CWC had done nothing. One person declared: “It is the biggest joke that Thondaman would look after us.”



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