

Sri Lankan plantation workers denounce government over landslide tragedy

Our correspondents
20 November 2014

Thousands of plantation workers from several tea estates in Sri Lanka's central highlands Nuwareliya district have held strikes and demonstrations over the landslide at Koslanda that killed about 200 workers and family members on October 29.

Demanding housing in secure locations, workers have rallied in a number of towns, including Bogawanthalawa, Maskeliya and Hatton. They raised slogans condemning President Mahinda Rajapakse's government, plantation managements and trade unions for leaving them exposed to landslide disasters for years.

The landslide was the biggest disaster in Sri Lanka since the 2004 tsunami. It destroyed a kilometre-wide strip of land where about 150 plantation workers' families lived in Meeriyabedda estate. Seven "lines"—long buildings divided into 20 small living quarters or "line rooms"—were flattened. A dozen bodies have been recovered, with many more still missing, buried under mud and earth.

It poured with rain in the area during the weeks before the landslide but the estate management and government authorities took no action to evacuate the people.

Much of the anger on the protests has been directed against Arumugam Thondaman, a minister in Rajapakse's government and the leader of the main plantation trade union, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC). In a BBC interview, Thondaman claimed that he was not aware that families were living in the area despite warnings about landslides. In reality, the National Building Research Organisation (NBRO) mapped and identified the Koslanda area as high-risk, and its experts have issued warnings since 2005.

In 2012, the NBRO identified 47 critical landslide areas and 30 landslide-prone schools that needed to be

mitigated to reduce the risks to children, residents, infrastructure and plantations within the districts of Badulla, Nuwaraeliya, Kandy and Matale. Out of the 47 landslide sites, NBRO prioritised 16 sites that required urgent action. However, only a handful of mitigation projects were implemented.

Workers who participated in strikes and demonstrations spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters, over the failure of the government, companies and unions to protect people known to be living in great danger.

V. Sagunthala, a female worker from the Glenugie tea estate in Up-Cot, commented: "If the government and plantation management had built proper housing in a safe place, the deaths would have been prevented. Nobody cares about our lives. The unions cover up our real conditions and work hand-in-hand with the plantation managements.

"In our estate, several houses were warned of landslide dangers. I also have no proper house to live in. My husband is dead and I am living with my children in a temporary hut. I have complained to the management and the CWC office several times about my housing problem, but none of them care about it."

Kandasamy Sivapiragasam, a CWC member, explained: "The families of myself and my brother—altogether 9 people—live in one cramped house, located in a place where landslide warnings have been issued. There are no basic facilities in the kitchen. When we cook, the entire house is covered with smoke.

"The CWC union leader in our estate tries to stop us from speaking about our conditions in public or to the media, but I am ready to openly speak about our slave-like conditions. The unions are useless. I had to go to the management office more than 50 times to get one rubber sheet to cover our roof during the rainy season."

Sivapiragasam concluded: “All the unions claim that they joined the government to help workers. Instead they have secured lucrative ministerial posts, over our dead bodies.”

A retired worker from Glenugie said: “Several workers in our estate are living in temporary huts. Some workers were given four perches (400 square metres) of land to build houses. All the plots were on sloped land, with no areas dividing one house from the other. So, if a landslide happens, all the houses will come down like building blocks.

“We are here to protest, not only to show our sympathy with our fellow workers who have perished or just survived a great tragedy in Koslanda, but also to insist that other workers facing similar dangers should be taken care of. The government is spending millions of rupees to build highways, while plantation workers have been condemned to live in unsafe line rooms for the past 150 years!”

Many workers said that although warnings to vacate the houses were reportedly issued as far back as 2005, the government and estate authorities did nothing to organise alternative housing. The families had nowhere to go, forcing them to continue to live in danger. They denounced the indifference and complacency of all those who were responsible for allowing the tragedy to occur.

WSWS reporters also visited the Poonagala Tamil School, where 64 families displaced by the Koslanda landslide were housed, along with 157 families from the Diyagala estate who were threatened by landslides. About 30 people had to share one classroom of 40 square meters.

Marimuthu Rajareader, a former Meeriyabedda estate worker, said: “Older workers were completely abandoned by the government and the management. We all knew we were living in areas vulnerable to landslides. What to do? Where to go when no alternative places were offered? The government is doing nothing for us. Its only concern is about our votes.”

Rajareader added: “Neither Thondaman [the CWC leader] nor the government nor the estate management has given us any assurance of housing for us in a safer place. The estate superintendent and his deputy visited us here and requested that we report for work as they are facing a loss. Their sole concern is about money.

Entire generations of our people have toiled to make profits for them. They offered us alternative housing, but in an area where a landslide occurred 60 years ago. They are going to push us into devastation again. We chased them away.”

In an attempt to downplay the scale of the disaster, the Rajapakse government has cut its estimate of the number of people killed in the Koslanda landslide to 34. The government’s Disaster Management Center (DMC), which earlier reported that 330 people lived in the affected area, reduced that number to 100. The DMC claimed that information had not yet been received about 78 of the 100 residents, but suggested that only 34 perished, with the remainder displaced somewhere.

Meeriyabedda workers housed at the Poonagala Tamil School condemned this attempt to revise the casualty figures. They said the government was simply trying to cut its expenses for affected people.



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