

Sri Lanka: Seven killed in central hills tea estate landslide

Our correspondents
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Seven people, including four children, were killed and another was severely injured by a landslide in the Nuwara Eliya central hills district on September 25. Five houses at the Liliesland division of the Wedamulla tea estate at Ramboda were destroyed and another nine partially damaged in the disaster, which was precipitated by torrential rain throughout Sri Lanka last week.

Those killed were Sivanu Loganayahi (48), Senkkhol Lechumy (68), Kandasamy Subashni (22), Shanmugaraj Puwana (6), Gnana Segaran Anu (9), Gnanasegaran Arun (4) and Sivachandran Puwana (2). Chellaiah Gamesman was seriously injured and admitted to the Kandy Teaching Hospital.

Most residents were at work in the estate when the landslide occurred at about 2.30 p.m. Plantation workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that if the earth-slip had occurred during the night, many more people would have been killed.

Twenty-two families, or more than 70 survivors, are being housed at the Wedamulla estate division library and the Ramboda division community centre. The emergency accommodation and assistance is being organised by Sri Lanka's disaster management ministry.

National Union of Workers leader and Sri Lankan government minister P. Digambaram visited the area and attempted to placate the victims' concerns by saying they would temporarily be accommodated in sheds on the estate. He claimed they would be provided with homes in the future. Several residents told WSWs reporters, however, that they live in fear that they could be buried alive in another landslide.

The Wedamulla estate, owned by the Agalawatta Plantations Company, is situated 15 kilometres from Nuwara Eliya town, near the road to Kandy. There are

almost 400 people, or 130 families, living in run down line-rooms on the estate. The Liliesland division is in a remote location. Residents are forced to walk about three kilometres, along a severely damaged road, to reach the main road and the nearest transport. Children walk this route to catch a bus to the closest school in Ramboda.

Plantation worker S. Indrani told WSWs reporters how the disaster occurred. "The landslide happened during our work time and just near where we were working. We heard a big sound and saw big stones and mud coming down. The houses were destroyed within a few seconds.

"Workers rushed to the scene from every side of the estate and tried to save people buried under the mud, using whatever instruments they had and under conditions of heavy rain. The police came at about 3 p.m. but the rescue army didn't arrive until at about 7 p.m. Six bodies were found by workers on the same day and the body of a child was discovered by the army the next day."

While the government is providing food, the more than 70 survivors are crammed into the emergency accommodation, which only has one toilet. One female estate worker said: "We have a lot of difficulties staying here with children and we can't go to work from here, so we will lose our wages for these days. I don't know how long we will have to be here."

Muniyandi Rajani, a young worker cultivating vegetables on a plot of land within the estate, said that although he lived away from the landslide location and close to the river, the entire area was dangerous. "After that incident my children now live in fear and I sent them to a relative's house," he said.

"After last year's landslide at Meeriyabedda, the Nuwara Eliya district secretary came to our estate and

said that a bund [embankment] should be built along the river in the area. But nothing happened,” he continued. “Now a landslide has taken place on the hill at a higher area. We are now requesting that all families must be evacuated from here and houses built for us in a safe place.”

The Meeriyabedda landslide, which killed 37 people, occurred last October in the central hills, about 100 kilometres from Ramboda. Though there were official warnings about the danger of landslides, plantation management did not inform workers or take any emergency measures or relocate them before the disaster. Nearly one year since the landslide, only a handful of families have been given tiny houses and others small plots to erect houses (see: “Sri Lankan landslide victims still in makeshift accommodation”).

Plantation workers are among the most exploited sections of the Sri Lankan working class, forced to live in dilapidated, overcrowded barracks-style line rooms and confronting the ever-present danger of catastrophic landslides. Successive governments and the unions—the National Union of Workers, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and Up-country Peoples Front—have refused to take any action to demand the highly-profitable plantation companies provide safe or adequate housing or take any serious action to prevent the increasing number of landslides.

Liliesland worker Vijaya Lakshmi’s house is in serious disrepair, with large cracks in its walls. After complaining to estate management, she was given temporary accommodation but then sent back to her original home, even though it could collapse at any time. Lakshmi told the WSWS that she complained to the CWC leaders but was ignored.

Indrani is a casual estate worker, paid just 450 rupees (\$3) per day. Her pay is less than the daily wage of a permanent worker, even though she does the same work. Indrani said she had previously retired but was forced to resume work because she had no other means of support. When the tea harvest is good, estate workers can pluck the 18-kilogram daily target. During the dry seasons, if the amount of plucked tea falls below that target, workers only receive half the day rate.

Rajani explained the situation facing local youth. “The company does not register youth for work but sometimes they might be hired for 450 rupees a day as casual workers. Even though we complain, all the

unions ignore our problems. Many youth are forced to leave the estate and find work on vegetable farms to earn a higher wage.”

Tea estates have dominated Sri Lanka’s central hills district for more than a century, with tens of thousands of hectares used to cultivate the crop. In their reckless drive for profits, British colonial tea planters and large local companies deforested the area, creating the conditions for serious soil erosion and landslides, endangering the lives of plantation workers and poor peasants in adjoining villages.

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