

WSWS reporters visit landslide victims in Sri Lanka

Our correspondents
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Amid torrential rain in Sri Lanka, the number of deaths and of people displaced by severe floods and landslides is increasing. According to the Disaster Management Center, the number of deaths have climbed to 64; 319,507 people have been displaced, and overall 427,918 persons have been affected.

World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) reporters visited Aranayake and Bulathkohupitiya, two areas in Kegalle District, severely affected by two major landslides.

Bulathkohupitiya

WSWS reporters traveled 80 km from Colombo to the Rangalla junction near Bulathkohupitiya and walked 3km along a damaged road. There was no proper public transport to Kalupahanawatte tea estate, where the disaster had happened.

Sixteen people are reported dead in Kalupahanawatte due to Tuesday's landslide. Up to now, 14 bodies have been discovered; soldiers engaged in rescue operations are searching for others.

Six out of 10 line rooms, the barrack-type housing for the plantation workers, were destroyed in the landslide. Sixteen people were buried under the huge flow of mud and rocks. Survivors are staying in Sri Silananda School in Yattella, together with other displaced people from Aduragalawatte and Lewalawatte, two other landslide-prone areas nearby.

Two hundred ninety-eight people from 93 families are lodged in small classrooms that lack facilities. They are all together sharing only five toilets, and they have to sleep on the cement floors, even in the cold rainy nights. Since the buildings are only half covered, they suffer from rain and mosquito bites. They are supplied with food by nearby villagers and voluntary organizations.

WSWS reporters spoke to several people who were in shock after losing their loved ones and their belongings.

One worker from Nandanawatte, a nearby tea estate, said: "We lived in Urumeewalawatte and came to Nandanawatte two years ago, because we were asked to move from the previous place which was at risk of landslides. The estate management and the divisional secretariat promised houses for us. So we shifted to the given lands, putting up some makeshift houses there. We are still living in those houses, as they didn't keep their promises. Now we had to move here, as we cannot live in those houses under heavy rain at all."

Murugaiyah Rajendran, 38, a worker from Kalupahanawatte, some of whose relatives died in the landslide, expressed his anger with the estate management and the successive governments.

"Two years ago, the government and the management told us to move to another place, saying that our living places were under landslide threat. But they didn't provide us any alternative land. Even if we were provided such land, we wouldn't be able to build proper houses. However, with the experience of the people from Urumeewalawatte, we knew that we were going to face the same result," he said.

Rajendran recalled the fate of workers in Meeriyabadde, Koslanda who still live in makeshift camps after the 2014 landslide, saying: "There should be a permanent solution for the landslide issue, but I don't believe in the management and the government."

In the course of discussion with Rajendran, National Dialogue Minister Mano Ganesan and National Languages Minister P. Digambaram, both plantation trade union leaders, arrived. Then Rajendran expressed his anger towards them: "It took three days after the disaster for them to see what happened to us. See how they are concerned about our lives! They don't pay any attention on this serious issue of landslides frequently faced by many of the estate workers in the hill

country.”

Aranayake

We visited the area where three villages were devastated by a landslide. It is located nearly 72 km away from Colombo. Nearly 75 out of an estimated total of 370 houses in these villages have completely vanished.

The massive flow containing mud, rocks and trees generated by the landslide smashed through two villages, Siripura and Depathgama, around 5.00 p.m. Tuesday. Within about five minutes, another landslide occurred. It has carried nearly 400 acres from the land, which had been a tea estate before it was transformed into Siripura village. Again Thursday, another landslide was reported in the area, suggesting that this disaster has not come to an end.

The mixture of rocks, trees, and mud ultimately ended its destructive journey by covering an entire paddy field, in some places up to 20 feet deep. In Siripura, each of all 51 families lost at least one member.

Survivors complained that they had not been properly warned about risk of landslides in the area. One Development Officer had warned villages only half an hour before the landslide.

Saman Athugala said: “We complained to government officers about ground cracks that had occurred at the top of the hill. They came and inquired about that, but they never took proper action. Earlier we also complained about a minor landslide three years before. The same happened then. We need a permanent solution. But we have no trust about the government.”

Displaced people from landslide-affected villages are temporarily living in Maalapaha Rajamaha Viharaya (a Buddhist temple) and Dikpitiya Rajagiriya Maha Vidyalaya (a school) in the Aranayake area. Altogether, 803 displaced people live in these camps within a 5000 square-foot area.

Premasiri Athugala, a worker from Thulhiriya Trade Zone, who now lives in Maalapaha Rajamaha Viharaya, said: “As a result of this disaster, I lost 19 relatives. I have a house that has not been destroyed by the landslide. But now I am frightened to live there. We only want a house to live without fear.”

Kumuduni Kumari, a widow now staying in Dikpitiya Rajagiriya Maha Vidyalaya, said: “When the disaster happened, my husband was in his mother’s house.

Then he died. He was the sole breadwinner of our family. Now we have been stranded.”

Colombo

According to the Disaster Management Centre, around 200,000 people have been displaced and are living in relief camps due to floods in the Colombo area. Thousands of people were captured by floods in the Kolonnawa and Wellampitiya areas, due to the extraordinary rise of the water level of the Kelani River.

One affected person told the WSWs: “Due to lack of boats, many affected people in Colombo had to flee to safety by private boats, paying huge amounts. Those who were unable to pay such amounts had to stay in the floods for days until the Navy rescued them. Some people are still there, which means taking a huge risk.”



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