

Colombo flood victims speak to the WSWS

Our correspondents
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with flood survivors in Colombo and surrounding suburbs last week. Tens of thousands of people were forced to abandon their homes as the Kelani River, one of Sri Lanka's major rivers, inundated the outskirts of Colombo.

Working-class and poor families are currently sheltering in makeshift accommodation on higher ground. Many have erected tents along nearby railway tracks. Hundreds of people are without food and drinking water.

Nihal and his son were on the roof of their home near the Orugodawatta canal. "When our family expanded we had to move here 20 years ago, paying ten thousand rupees. Every time there's heavy rain, water from the nearby canal floods into our homes. This time it came up to the roof," Nihal said.

"We escaped by boat without our belongings and finally sheltered near a street. Many displaced families have taken shelter under the Orugodawatta flyover. My sister also lives in a shanty in the same area.

"Our furniture has been soaked in the flood and is now useless. I've tried to clean some of it as the water has receded but the skin of my legs has been affected by the dirt in the water. Will we be able to use our clothes after this? Many families face the same conditions. Politicians only come down here during the elections. No government cares about us or will give us proper homes," he complained.

Sevvandi lived with her parents on a small plot of land at Sedawaththa. "My sister and I share this small home which has two entrances. Our husbands are casual workers at a tea packing company. I have a three-year-old child and I'm pregnant again. My sister has an eight-month old baby. Both families are forced to live in this dirty place.

"Sometimes the garbage piles around here smell very bad. It's so bad that people travelling by train close

their mouths and noses but we have to live here with our children. Now the drainage of the next home has leaked and it is making things worse."

Another flood survivor said: "This government, like the last one, is evicting poor people to release land for the big companies. The last government demolished a lot of houses on Slave Island. Before they evict people they should build proper homes for them. If the government does not provide us with houses we have to erect our own in 'unauthorised' places."

Sampath in Keleniya told the WSWS that he was building a new shanty with thin sheets of wood. "I have two sons, one 11-years-old and the other three. I'm building this because we were in another shanty home with my brother's family. There was not enough space. We were on Slave Island where the former government demolished our homes. We came here several years before that. I'm a welder working for casual rates and only earn 30,000 rupees to try and feed my family."

WSWS reporters also visited a primary school at Bomiriya which has been transformed into a makeshift camp. It was originally home to over 32 Tamil families. There are now about 160 people—men, women and children—at the school. The families all lived in Ketewatta, reservation land belonging to the Irrigation Department on the banks of Kelani River. They lived in shanties made of wood and tin sheets. The residents' main income is from day-paid laboring and working in garment factories.

Rajeshwari, 38, a single mother and garment worker with one child, said: "This is the biggest flood I've seen in my entire life. There was a flood in 1989 but this one has destroyed everything we own, even our children's learning materials.

"[Prime Minister] Ranil Wickremesinghe visited us. We told him that the only thing we want is a permanent house. His response was just 'let's see.' We've been hearing these sorts of words for over 30 years and they

never come true.”



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