

Sri Lankan government exploits flood disaster to evict Colombo's poor

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Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena has declared all flood and landslide affected areas in Colombo and around the country to be High Security Zones (HSZs). He instructed government authorities not to allow any “unauthorised dwellings” and banned “reclamation” of land in those areas.

Sirisena’s announcement on May 23 at a Presidential Task Force meeting shows that his government is determined to use the flood disaster to evict poor people from their dwellings, particularly in Colombo and suburbs. The pretext is “controlling flash floods.” By “unauthorised dwellings,” the government means low-income houses erected on state lands. However, almost all the families affected have lived in these areas for decades.

The eviction of the poor is part of the government’s broader Megapolis and Western Development Project to build a cluster of cities around Colombo to serve international and local investors, based on similar developments in Singapore and Hong Kong. Successive governments have estimated that at least 68,000 families in Colombo alone must be cleared to release valuable land for investors.

Because of flooding and landslides last month, about 102 people have been confirmed dead and more than 100 are missing, while half a million are displaced. Tens of thousands remain in makeshift camps. While the number of deaths was 14 in Colombo city and its immediate suburbs, these were the worst affected areas. More than 300,000 people had to flee their homes. Almost all the victims are from poor families, many living in shanties in low-lying Colombo north and its suburbs around the Kelani River.

Sirisena blamed the poor for the floods, saying the “destruction of the environment and illegal settlements have caused the [flood] problem.” He added: “People

will be allowed to settle in suitable places.” Committees and agencies would prepare reports on how to relocate these people, he said.

Well aware that opposition among residents will erupt against evictions, Sirisena said there may be “criticisms” and “protests,” but “as a government we cannot allow people to live in unsafe places.” His crocodile tears for the poverty-stricken survivors cannot hide the government’s real aims. Sirisena was a senior minister under President Mahinda Rajapakse whose government used the military and police commandos to put down popular resistance to forced removals.

The minister in charge of the Megapolis Project, Champika Ranawaka, said at a meeting on May 29 that 8,470 families were living on riverbanks and near Colombo canals. This indicates that they will be the immediate targets.

The eviction of shanty dwellers is a long-standing plan of successive governments. President J. R. Jayawardene’s government tried to establish a Megapolis in 1985. The plan was renewed in 2004 under Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The former Rajapakse government, particularly after the end of the civil war in May 2009, began unveiling plans to convert Colombo into a commercial, financial and tourist hub in South Asia. Around 1,000 shanties, houses and small business places were demolished in Colombo. Those evicted were given meagre sums to rent houses or were sent to makeshift camps. Many lost their livelihoods.

By blaming the poor, the government is trying to mobilise public opinion against them. Ruling-class parties make rosy promises to the poor to win their votes in elections. Once in office, they brand the poor as the source of all evils, including floods, epidemics and crime. Former secretary for defence and urban

development, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, contemptuously declared that slums in the capital were “eye sores.”

In reality, the responsibility for the flood disaster rests squarely with successive governments and the Sri Lankan ruling elite as a whole that have failed to take adequate prevention measures. No administration, moreover, has developed any plan to improve the conditions of life for the poor, such as the development of infrastructure, housing and the social and cultural environment.

The media and big business praised the Rajapakse government for its so-called “beautification” of Colombo. While investors were given billions of rupees to build up-market projects and pleasure gardens no investments were made in the areas inhabited by the poor.

A health department report in 2008 showed that 50 percent of Colombo city’s population—approximately 321,000 people, or 77,612 families—were living in low-income settlements. Of those families, 33 percent did not have proper access to drinking water and only 33 percent had their own toilets. Just 12 percent of these families had regular sources of employment, while 34 percent depended on self-employment.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government is taking Rajapakse’s project to a higher level. High-rise condominiums—some about 70 storeys—and hotels and parks are being built but there is no housing for the poor. Flats have been constructed for only a few hundred evicted families. These are poorly built and lack adequate facilities.

As a result of these “development projects,” 30 percent of Colombo’s water retention capacity has been lost. According Professor P.K.S. Mahanama of Moratuwa University, Colombo needs 1,000 acres for water retention but the city now has only 600 acres, as a result of marshland being filled for building construction. Early this year, unprecedented floods in Chennai (Madras) were caused by similar so-called mega developments which drastically reduced water retention areas.

Addressing a summit organised by the UN Development Program, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe emphasised the government’s determination to make the Megapolis “the largest city in the Indian Ocean region.”

Facing a deepening economic crisis, Sirisena and

Wickremesinghe are desperate to attract international capital, which they see as a vital for their political survival. During the war in the north and east against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the government established various HSZs to suppress the struggles of workers and the poor. Sirisena is resorting to similar police-state methods and demonstrating the government’s readiness to ruthlessly impose the measures demanded by the financial elite.



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