

Floods in Sri Lanka: Government responsible for another social disaster

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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Last week, the working people of Sri Lanka were once again victims of devastating floods and landslides. The deaths of hundreds of people and the displacement and suffering of more than half a million are not just the outcome of a natural disaster. The crisis results from callous disregard for the lives of ordinary people by successive governments dedicated to defending the profit system. This includes the present government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The disaster occurred as torrential rains from a southwestern monsoon pelted down, accompanied by a cyclonic storm. The damage is colossal. The final death count would be 300, state minister Lakshman Yapa Abeywardene announced last Thursday.

According to the Disaster Management Centre (DMC) yesterday, 717,622 people have been affected. Among them are 150,000 women, 7,600 pregnant mothers and around 189,000 children. At least 25,000 students have lost their books and school stationery. More than 2,300 homes have been destroyed and 12,500 partially damaged. Many areas remain unreachable by road, due to flooding and landslides. The total cost of the damage to property has yet to be calculated.

The victims are now vulnerable to flood-related diseases, including mosquito-borne fever, diarrhoea and dysentery.

The destruction is the worst since the 2003 floods and landslides, which claimed 264 lives and destroyed 10,000 houses. Most victims are tea- and rubber-plantation workers, peasants and small cultivators. They live on poverty-level incomes of \$US1 to \$2 a day. Many could now become destitute.

Who is responsible for this massive disaster?

Just a few hours before the deluge hit the island, Disaster Management Minister Anura Priyadarshana Yapa bombastically told the “2017 Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction” in Cancun, Mexico that his government was prepared to minimise the impact of any disaster. His ministry had plans to “implement medium- and long-term disaster risk reduction programs” in line with international standards in order “to minimise casualties, damage to infrastructure, and economic losses.”

Yapa boasted of a “National Action Plan” with “committed funds to develop a risk profile.” Yet, no early warning was issued and no evacuation plan was carried out before or immediately after the disaster. The basic necessities for displaced people were simply not available.

After lamenting the heavy rains, the president, prime minister and their ministers turned their fire on the population. They

claimed that the people did not heed the authorities’ advance warnings and declared that allegedly illegal construction was a primary cause of the floods.

- The claim by the government that its agencies made early warnings, but the people did not respond, is a deliberate fabrication to blame the population for the disaster. The government had not prepared any of its agencies to issue such warnings. Meteorological Department director general Lalith Chandrapala revealed that he did not have Doppler radar capability or sophisticated equipment “which allows for accurate forecasting of the direction and velocity of the storms.” Irrigation Department director general M. Thuraisingham said his department did not have enough sensors to predict the flooding. The poorly-equipped Meteorological Department “warned” of a 150 millimetre rainfall, considered normal. However, the downpour was from 300 to 550 millimetres and came with thunderstorms.

- The other reason for the deluge is the government’s own irrational, unscientific construction—part of its so-called “development” drive. In building the Southern Expressway, which runs through most of the flooded area, the government ignored the Environment Authority’s assessment. In 2010, leading engineer and architect Surath Wickremesinghe warned: “The earth banks of the expressways and highways, which prevent the free flow of water, promote flooding.” He also pointed out that the “arbitrary filling” of marshes and canal reservations caused floods. He proposed rational alternatives, such as constructing highways and buildings on pylons, where necessary.

- The government’s other propaganda about unauthorised construction is also false. Studies have shown that so-called “illegal” construction—shanties and huts—do not have a major impact on erosion and flooding.

This propaganda has a sinister purpose. The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government has broadened the scope of the program of the previous President Mahinda Rajapakse to convert Colombo into a South Asian commercial and financial hub and a megapolis covering the entire Western Province. The government plans to build throughout the country for commercial purposes, and wants to clear land by removing the poor, who are not being given decent alternative housing or livelihoods.

Minister Yapa said the government would change the 100-year-old Flood Management Act to create penalties for illegal constructions. “All illegal structures will be demolished, including 10,000 in the capital,” he said.

The *Sunday Times*, no opponent of the capitalist system, bluntly declared yesterday in its “Focus on Rights” column: “Let us be very clear. The issue is not the law. It is the sheer woeful incompetence of the political leadership and more specifically the imbeciles in charge of disaster management.”

While ordering the demolition of “illegal construction,” mainly directed against the poor, Sirisena is visiting the affected areas, shedding crocodile tears and directing his ministers and state officials to speed up the relief work. The government says it will pay compensation to the victims, while the Central Bank of Sri Lanka has announced a three-month “grace period” to pay back loans.

The government is nervous that the flood disaster will increase the widespread anger among the masses. Working people, urban and rural, are already coming into struggle against the government's attacks on their living and social conditions, as it implements the International Monetary Fund's austerity program.

People are expressing legitimate fears about becoming permanently destitute after such devastation. The Asian tsunami in December 2004 was the worst “natural disaster” they had faced. It killed around 40,000 and wiped out thousands of homes. Many children were orphaned and received no aid.

Just five weeks before the latest catastrophe, 32 people were killed and around 1,000 people lost their homes when a garbage dump collapsed at Meethotamulla, in the Colombo suburbs.

A year ago, an explosion at a military weapons storage camp, close to Colombo, brought disaster to dozens of residents.

There have also been many landslides, costing scores of lives, during the past few years.

Capitalism is directly responsible, without exception, for all these disasters. The ruling class and its governments have, time and again, proved their inability to address any of the social and democratic issues facing workers and the poor.

It is legitimate to ask: why did the government not buy Doppler radars to at least warn the people about the latest disaster? The truth is that the government has no concern for the people.

The Sri Lankan ruling elite waged a 30-year communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), spending billions of rupees annually on the military to defend capitalist rule and suppress the working people and youth. While gutting its existing limited social expenditure, it is still spending a huge 16 percent of the annual budget on the military. This ruling class is dedicated to defending the profit system and stands directly at the service of international capital.

The Sri Lankan tragedy is also being used by other powers to strengthen their geo-political influence in the island. The Indian government immediately sent three navy ships with 300 personnel and small boats to help with “relief efforts.” India, a close partner of the US and a strategic rival of China, is seeking close relations with Colombo. Washington, which is deepening military and political ties with Colombo, announced a pittance of 350 million rupees in aid, and sent soldiers and cadets to assist in the clean-up.

China is sending three navy ships, as well as smaller vessels and medical teams.

Significantly the government, assisted by the media, is promoting the military as the saviour of the people. The army, air force and navy have sent in thousands of soldiers in rescue teams. This has a definite purpose. The military has been discredited by its war crimes during the island's long war, and for directing its guns against protesters—as it did at Rathupaswela in 2013, attacking a demonstration and shooting down three youth. The government wants to give the armed forces a humanitarian face in order to use them against the future struggles of workers and the poor.

During the torrential rain and in its aftermath, ordinary people have shown their sympathy towards the victims, rescuing them, evacuating them to safer places and providing relief goods. Workers and the poor must draw lessons from these tragic events. No section of the ruling class and its governments will address these problems. Working people must take matters into their own hands. Their true friends are their international class brothers and sisters.

Rational, scientific planning of the economy for the benefit of majority of the people can only be assured by ending capitalist rule and by the working class taking political power, with the support of the oppressed masses, to implement an international socialist program. This means a struggle must be waged to establish a workers' and peasants' government, by mobilising the working class and youth in a fight for social and democratic rights against the attacks of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government.

What is urgently needed to prosecute this struggle is the building of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), as a mass party of the working class.



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