

Three months after the Meethotamulla disaster in Sri Lanka

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19 July 2017

Last Friday marked three months since the catastrophic collapse of the Meethotamulla garbage dump in Colombo. Angry victims are blaming the government for the loss of lives and for evicting them from the area without providing proper housing or a means of income.

The official death toll of the Meethotamulla disaster is 32, with another eight people listed as missing. Residents, however, claim the real figure would be much higher, as the poorest victims, who were buried alive, did not appear in official records. The military-led rescue teams called off the search for bodies after several days. Around 146 houses have been damaged, affecting 198 families or around 1,000 people.

Unsafe open dumping in natural wetland in Meethotamulla began in 1987, and was continued by successive governments. It produced a huge garbage mountain covering 9 hectares and exceeding 60 metres in height (22 acres and 200 feet).

Local people held one protest after another against the health hazards and the danger that the massive pile could collapse and take lives. The governments of former President Mahinda Rajapakse and the current President Maithripala Sirisena deployed police to violently suppress the protests.

During the 2015 presidential election campaign, Sirisena sought to exploit the mounting anger by promising to “solve” the Meethotamulla problem. His government has now seized on the disaster to try to evict poor residents and take their land.

The Rajapakse government began clearing 70,000 poor families from their shanties in Colombo as part of its plan to transform the capital into a major commercial and financial hub in South Asia. The residents of Meethotamulla have been pushed to move since 2011. The present government extended the plan,

with Meethotamulla earmarked as prime land in the Megapolis project.

This basic fact has been deliberately buried by the government and the establishment media, which blame the refusal of local residents to move for the disaster. The president has appointed a one-man inquiry into the disaster that will whitewash the government’s role and cover up the real reasons for the tragedy.

People are now banned from the area. In the name of providing alternative housing for the victims, authorities are systematically dispersing displaced residents. Families have been given a grossly inadequate allowance of between 50,000 and 150,000 rupees (\$US325-975) to relocate.

Some families have been allocated tiny apartments in the 10th and 11th floors of a multi-story “low-income” complex, not suitable for decent living, about a kilometre away. Others are staying nearby in rented houses, hoping to get compensation for their land and houses. Those who lived in tiny wooden houses will be given a pittance and will be unable to find suitable accommodation elsewhere.

Meethotamulla was not an accident or an isolated phenomenon. Following the collapse, protests erupted against dozens of unsafe open dumps throughout the country, including in Kandy, Hatton, Karadiyana and Muthrajawela. The government responded with brutal police assaults on protestors.

The bankrupt Sri Lankan capitalist class is completely incapable of addressing the social and democratic needs of the vast majority of working people. The limited social rights won through the struggles of the working class, such as public education and health, have been severely eroded.

President J. R. Jayawardene’s government was one of the first in the world to initiate pro-market restructuring

to open up the economy to foreign investment. The tax concessions and other benefits offered to investors were paid for by slashing public spending on essential social services. Privatisations opened up new areas of the economy to private profit. Living standards, jobs, wages and working conditions have all been sacrificed to the constant demand for “international competitiveness.”

Similar processes have taken place internationally, including in the major imperialist centres, widening the gulf between rich and poor. The Meethotamulla tragedy found its parallel in the June 14 inferno that engulfed the Grenfell tower, where poor workers were housed, in the middle of a wealthy district of London.

The onslaught on the working class has intensified since the 2008 global financial crisis. The International Monetary Fund has directly intervened in Sri Lanka to force governments to further slash public spending. The small allocation of 2 percent of gross domestic product on health that existed in the 1970s has plunged to 1.2 percent.

Colombo has been effectively segregated as large swathes of land have been cleared for businesses and luxury apartments. The poor have been driven into low-income ghettos. The World Bank directly encourages the drive to “beautify” downtown areas and affluent suburbs of the city to attract foreign investment.

Colombo symbolises the social inequality in Sri Lanka. According to the 2016 British-based Knight Frank wealth report, 170 individuals in the Colombo district had wealth of more than \$10 million. On July 1, the World Capital Centre signed a \$2 billion agreement to build Asia’s tallest tower with 117 floors in Colombo containing luxury apartments, hotel rooms and commercial outlets.

A dengue epidemic, which is engulfing the country, is rampant in the Colombo district. The official death toll nationally has climbed to 290 and the number of patients to more than 90,000. This reflects the decay of public health measures, but the government has blamed the epidemic on residents, particularly the poor, and launched a police crackdown.

Special police units arrested around 1,200 individuals for the “errant disposal” of household waste in the last fortnight of June alone. Joint police and army groups have been deployed, along with municipality officials, to inspect the houses and gardens for mosquito

breeding places, with special powers to impose on-the-spot fines.

The fight for elementary democratic and social rights is necessarily bound up with a political struggle to abolish the outmoded capitalist order that leads to tragedies such as occurred at Meethotamulla.

Such a struggle is not only opposed by the major capitalist parties but their pseudo-left apologists and supporters. Their role has been exposed by the record of the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP). It joined local United National Party (UNP) leaders in directing residents’ protests into appeals to the Rajapakse government, and then to the present “unity” government, in which the UNP is a major partner.

This whole policy is based on pressuring the political representatives of the capitalist class that is responsible for such disasters. Now the FSP is deflecting the anger of residents by acting as an intermediary with the government to get the “best” compensation for the victims.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is fighting for an opposed political perspective. The SEP insists that the Meethotamulla victims must be provided with decent housing and a secure income. The fight for this demand has to be linked to the struggles of workers against the broader attacks of the government on jobs, wages and living conditions in a common fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government and socialist policies. These include the repudiation of foreign debt and the nationalisation of the banks, big companies and estates under the democratic control of the working class.

Those responsible for the Meethotamulla tragedy must be held accountable and punished, and its causes unearthed. That is why the SEP has called an Independent Workers Inquiry on the Meethotamulla Disaster. We urge workers, youth and all those who value social and democratic rights to support this campaign. Enrol for this inquiry today.



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