

India: Death toll from Kerala landslide rises to 65

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4 September 2020

The official number of those killed in a landslide early last month at a tea plantation in the southern Indian state of Kerala has climbed to 65. The tea estate was at Rajamala, near Munnar, in the Idukki district. Plantation workers and their family members died when the massive landslide buried a row of 20 estate workers' homes in the early hours of August 7.

According to media reports, over 80 people lived in the dwellings—most of them single-room shacks. Only 12 people survived the disaster and five remain missing, presumed dead. Most of the estate workers came from families that originally migrated from Tamil Nadu and had been living in the area for three generations.

Rescue and search operations were suspended after three weeks due to rising water levels in a nearby river. Several victims are believed to have been washed away.

The landslides occurred at around 2 a.m. The area, which is part of the Eravikulam National Park lacks decent road access. Munnar, the nearest town, is some 30 kilometres away.

Workers were only allowed to live in the national park because of the presence of plantations. The estates are owned by the Kanan Devan Hills Plantations Company, which took over from Tata Tea Limited, when the latter withdrew from most of its plantations in Munnar to focus on the growth of its branded tea business.

Nearly 12,000 people are employed by Kanan Devan Hills, which has seven tea estates, covering an area of 24,000 hectares, and 16 tea manufacturing units with an annual production of 22 million kilograms.

While preliminary analysis of the disaster points to the heavy rain in the area, landslides are not simply a natural calamity. Government authorities have failed to

provide the most basic public infrastructure to the region even though Munnar is Kerala's premium hill station and tourist spot. A general hospital, owned by Tata, is the only medical facility in the area. The nearest specialist hospital, the Government Medical College Hospital, is in Kottayam around 136 kilometres away.

Rescue operation teams, moreover, were not able to quickly reach the area because the temporary Periavari Bridge, which is the only way to get to the scene of the disaster, had been washed away by the heavy rain. The permanent bridge collapsed two years ago and a new bridge was under construction. Rescue vehicles and ambulances had to wait for hours until the temporary bridge was repaired.

Kerala's Left Democratic Front (LDF) state government, which is led by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist)-CPM, blamed poor access to the area for rescue operation delays. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, a CPM leader, blamed the lack of adequate electricity, telecommunications and roads to the region while taking no responsibility for his government's refusal to provide this basic infrastructure.

According to media reports, the area had no electricity for more than four days before the calamity. Questioned about this, Kerala State Electricity Board authorities attempted to wash their hands of any responsibility by declaring that power supplies to the area were under the control of the Kanan Devan Hills Plantations Company.

Along with the grossly inadequate infrastructure, the poverty-stricken estate employees face disastrous working and living conditions, which they fought to change for many years.

In 2015, nearly 300,000 plantation workers at state-

owned and private tea and rubber estates in Kerala began indefinite state-wide strike action demanding higher wages and better conditions. The plantation unions called the stoppage not to mobilise workers in an independent struggle to challenge the employers and the state government, but to dissipate workers' mounting hostility towards the unions and their collaboration with estate management.

The walkout was a response to widespread popular support for a militant nine-day strike by about 6,000, mainly women workers in Munnar from the Kanan Devan Hills Plantations Company the previous September. The Munnar workers, who rebelled against their unions attacking, barring officials from their meetings, demanded a 500-rupee daily wage (less than \$US7 per day) and a 20 percent bonus.

After winning the state elections in May 2016, CPM Chief Minister Vijayan visited Munnar and told the estate workers that their wages would be increased to 500-rupees per day. It remains another broken pledge.

In an attempt to contain mounting working-class anger over last month's landslide disaster, Vijayan announced a 500,000-rupee payment to the surviving families. Given his government's previous failure to deliver on official promises, even this meagre amount is unlikely to be delivered.

The opposition, Congress-led United Democratic Front, which has also headed numerous Kerala state governments, is equally responsible for the terrible conditions facing plantation workers and the latest disaster.



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