

Facing poverty and starvation, Sri Lankan mother of three attempts to take her own life

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Confronting unbearable poverty, a Sri Lankan mother of three from Warunagama, a remote village near Wellawaya, 140 kilometres east of Colombo, tried to take her own life early this month.

Varuni Dilhani, a 33-year-old former garment worker, had consumed highly poisonous nerium seeds (locally known as kaneru). After being admitted to Wellawaya hospital in a critical condition on June 7, she was immediately transferred to the main provincial general hospital in Badulla where she was treated for two days.

World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) reporters visited Warunagama last Sunday to see Dilhani and her family. She was lying on a bed, still ill, and unable to speak due to unbearable pain. W. A. Anura, her 43-year-old husband, explained that she needed prolonged rest and was worried about how to get the 8,000 rupees (about \$US25) he needed to take her back to hospital in two days, as doctors had instructed.

This tragic incident and the account given to WSWS reporters by Anura highlights the social catastrophe facing Sri Lanka's workers and oppressed masses, as a result of the brutal austerity measures being imposed by the ruling elite and President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's regime. Skyrocketing increases to the cost of essentials and shortages of staple food items have forced millions to drastically reduce meals while throwing others into starvation.

Anura told WSWS reporters about the desperate situation facing his family. "I'm a diabetic patient and was instructed to have one of my hands amputated after an infection. It was cured at the Colombo National Hospital but the diabetic situation has not lessened. During my illness we lived on income from hiring a three-wheeler [taxi]," he explained.

"Before coming to Warunagama, we lived in Piliyandala [Colombo district] and Dilhani worked at the Hirdramani Apparel factory in Kahathuduwa. She is

skilled at cutting and sewing cloth and if we had enough money to buy a sewing machine, she could have earned some income from sewing. She was mentally suffering from thinking about all of this," he said.

"We were only able to cope with the income received from the three-wheel owner after paying his portion. Our household equipment was bought from what we earned," he added.

The family moved to Warunagama, he continued, because of housing difficulties and other problems. Dilhani's mother gave them a small piece of land there, but his wife could not look for a job because she had to look after their three daughters who are 4, 5 and 9 years old.

"Our major issue is not having a proper house. We do not have the ownership of this wattle and daub house or this land," he said. "We have to travel five kilometres to get to the nearest school and classes only go up to Grade 5. We have to walk through sugarcane land to get there, but the children are getting burnt by the sun.

"I used to take my children to school on the three-wheeler but we were hit by the skyrocketing petrol prices and petrol scarcity so there are no hires now. We don't have any other income and the children now have to walk to school with someone else.

"People are really struggling day-to-day to survive here because of the price of goods. Those who work at the sugarcane estate are only paid a 1,200-rupee daily wage and others who did this or that odd job do not have any work now. Because of the drought people cannot grow maize. The land is full of weeds but there are no weedicides. There's no end to our problems and we're all facing the same problems," he said.

"Even though the government claimed that it would provide an allowance of 5,000 rupees, many people have not received it, and if you ask for it, you get scolded. We need this 5,000-rupee allowance and also Samurdhi [a

limited government welfare payment]. People are trying to survive on whatever they find, including drinking water, but we cannot buy goods because we do not have money. All of these issues worsened our family problems,” Anura said.

On June 11, *Divaina*, a Sinhala-language daily, published a vicious editorial entitled “Let us beg even to commit suicide.” While it did not explicitly mention the attempted suicide in Warunagama, the editorial referred to the poverty-stricken family’s situation.

It cynically declared: “[T]he biggest responsibility of a father that has legs and hands is to properly feed his children by whatever means... Our biggest question is that the father has not done anything to end the hunger of his children.” The editorial then callously proclaimed that there has “always been hunger” in Sri Lanka and that it will worsen in the future.

In other words, the population is to blame for the current situation and the responsibility for the tragic suicide attempt in Warunagama lies with the father of this poor family.

Sri Lankan newspapers and television broadcasters publish daily reports about growing numbers of families begging on roadsides and cursing the government over high prices and scarcities, while desperately attempting to hide the reality that the source of this social catastrophe is capitalism. Responsibility lies with the government and big business, not their victims.

Wellawaya is in Monaragala district, one of the areas hardest hit by Sri Lanka’s economic crisis and the government’s brutal social measures. Large numbers of workers and peasants are employed in sugarcane plantations owned by Pelwatte Sugar Company, many living in wattle and daub homes like Anura’s family.

Multinational corporations began cultivating sugarcane in the district, overtaking traditional farming, during the 1980s. Peasant farmers were allocated four-acre plots to cultivate sugarcane, and half an acre to build a home, with fertiliser supplied by the Pelwatte Sugar Company. This transformed them into wage slaves on their own land.

The sugarcane companies were established with the support of the government, which suppressed the eruption of struggles by small sugarcane farmers in Wellassa against land grabbing, low harvest prices and the cost of seed.

“One ton of sugarcane is worth 6,000 rupees and from 4 acres you need to produce 20 tons. To do this you need about 153,000 rupees for harvesting, labour and transport,” Sujith from Buttala told the WSWs.

“I began production on a loan basis. After harvest, the company pays us 250,000 rupees but after paying back your loans to the company you are only left with a small amount of money and so I abandoned cultivation,” he said.

The farmers in Monaragala district, which has dry weather, are among the most oppressed peasants in Sri Lanka, with poverty, malnutrition and unemployment dominating the masses in the district.

According to Census Department data in 2016, there were 149,215 families in the Monaragala district, with 38 percent of them receiving the grossly inadequate Samurdhi welfare. In 2019, the United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund reported that child malnutrition rates in the Monaragala and Hambantota districts were 25.4 and 21.8 percent respectively, close to rates in South Sudan.

The world economic crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and escalated by the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine has led to rampant inflation and a worldwide food crisis. The social horrors that led to Varuni Dilhani’s suicide attempt will intensify as the Rajapakse-Wickremesinghe government imposes round after round of brutal social attacks demanded by the International Monetary Fund.

As the Socialist Equality Party has explained, there is no socially progressive alternative to these attacks within the capitalist system. What is required is the building of independent action committees by the working class and the fight for a workers and peasants government based on a socialist and internationalist perspective to put an end to the capitalist system, the source of this poverty and social oppression.



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