

Sri Lanka: Massive fire destroys dozens of shanty homes in Kajeemawatte, Colombo

Our reporters
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On Tuesday evening a massive fire erupted at Kajeemawatte in Colombo's north, destroying more than 60 shanty homes and leaving hundreds of people without anywhere to live. The disaster again highlights the refusal of consecutive Sri Lankan governments to provide decent housing for the poor.

Fire brigade vehicles arrived half an hour after the blaze began and firefighters' attempts to douse the flames were disrupted by a lack of water. Residents also reported that although twelve firefighting vehicles attended, only two were able to get proper access.

This is the third time in the past 18 months that homes in the area have been incinerated: the first time was in April 2021, the second in March this year.

About 300 desperately poor families live in overcrowded and substandard homes in Kajeemawatte. They are forced to use common toilets and water pipelines and do not have proper electricity supplies. The average size of the homes destroyed in Tuesday's blaze was about 200 square feet (around 19 square metres) with many accommodating two or more families. Made from wooden planks, the tin-roofed homes were highly vulnerable to fire and flooding.

Many of the area's Sinhala, Muslim and Tamil residents work as day labourers, trishaw drivers, street vendors or at the fish and vegetable markets. Survivors of Tuesday's fire lost most of their belongings and had no food that night or breakfast the following day.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with some of the fire survivors who explained the disaster and its aftermath.

Juliet Pushparani, a 68-year-old whose home was totally destroyed, lived with her husband, and their son's family. This made a total of seven people in the dwelling.

The son, who works as a labourer at a cement warehouse for 2,000–2,500 rupees (\$US6–7) per day, is the household's only breadwinner. The family lost all its possessions, including birth certificates and other important documents.

"The fire appeared from the back side [of the house]. My daughter-in-law, her two children and I were the only ones

there," Pushparani said through tears.

"I was able to take my handbag and we all rushed away. My identity card was saved because it was in the handbag. All our clothes were burnt, there is nothing left. A gas cylinder later exploded."

Denouncing the government for not providing proper accommodation, she added: "We've been living here for over nine years but there are plenty of flats apartments without occupants. We could live there. We have no other solution."

Three years ago, the Urban Development Authority (UDA) promised some Kajeemawatte shanty residents that they would be provided accommodation, but nothing happened.

Pradeep, 33, is a construction worker. Married with two children, he has lived in the area for over 10 years. Last year his house was destroyed by fire. "People want to leave this hell-like area," he said, adding, "To get a home you need to make an initial installment of 100,000 rupees and then pay a monthly rental. There are lots of people who cannot pay this huge amount."

Musammil, a trishaw driver, is married with three children. He has lived in Kajeemawatte for over nine years. "The actual cause of the fire is not yet known but I guess about 65 houses have been destroyed," he said. Musammil noted that his home was destroyed because firefighters ran out of water.

"Everyone was able to escape the fire but only some people managed to take some of their belongings. All my children's clothes have been destroyed. Some people fled only with their children."

Dulaj Darshana, 12, is a Grade 7 student at the nearby Mawatte School. He is from a family of six children. "All my books were burnt. I could save only my clothes. I will go back to school after two months or so. My sisters' books were also burnt," Darshana said.

Kamal, 40, is married with two children and has lived in the area for over 10 years. He works as a driver for a small company. While the fire was extinguished before it reached his home, he said the blaze, and Sri Lanka's economic crisis

and hyperinflation, would worsen the situation facing shanty residents.

“While price rises are occurring frequently, our salaries are not increasing. I earn 30,000–40,000 rupees a month but this is hardly enough for meals and school expenses. We’ve been severely hit by these increases over the past one and a half years. For goods that used to cost us 5,000–7,000 rupees we now pay about 15,000 rupees,” he said.

“I eat well for breakfast but do not have lunch and take dinner with me to save 400 rupees. We’re only eating two meals a day now. Eggs are expensive and we eat fish only once a week and cannot afford nutritious food for our children. A kilo of beef is now 2,200 rupees and so we can only get a small amount for 300 rupees,” he said.

Kajeemawatte residents pointed out that there were 1,200 homes in nearby apartment blocks. About 400 are still vacant. They blame the UDA for not accommodating the 300 families from Kajeemawatte in these properties. While the UDA promised to resettle residents there three years ago in 2019, the authority then branded the shanty dwellers as “illegal settlers,” and used this to justify not providing the homes. Some families were also promised homes during the last general election. Nothing materialised.

Earlier this year, a group of residents lobbied the UDA and presented documents proving that they were entitled to the housing. Authorities threatened them, declaring that they would soon have to leave the area.

Survivors of Tuesday’s fire told WWSW reporters that politicians falsely promised to provide accommodation to homeless families after the two previous fires and that similar empty promises would be made again.

Kajeemawatte residents have been repeatedly harassed by the UDA and the police. In February 2016, the government disconnected electricity and water to some homes and moved to demolish them. Government authorities had to abandon these plans in the face of protests. In March, the police arrested 128 people, alleging they had illegally taken electricity.

Confronted with rising inflation and worsening social conditions, Kajeemawatte residents in April, along with millions of other Sri Lankans, participated in the mass protests demanding the resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government.

While Rajapakse was forced out, the trade unions, backed by pseudo-left groups, betrayed these struggles, opening the way for the widely hated Ranil Wickremesinghe to become president and begin implementing International Monetary Fund austerity measures.

Following Tuesday’s fire, the media widely reported that Wickremesinghe, who was in Tokyo at the funeral of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, had instructed the Sri

Lankan authorities to provide relief to fire survivors. This is bogus.

In fact, the government is moving to evict Kajeemawatte residents from the area as part of longstanding plans to clear Colombo slum areas and make the land available to property developers and for big business investment.

On Tuesday, Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena held a special district coordinating committee meeting with some ministers, parliamentarians and other officials to discuss “future plans” for the residents.

Gunawardena directed officials to look into “the possibility of stopping the UDA from maintaining the location as an intermediate settlement for those awaiting the establishment of permanent residences.” He also called on authorities to investigate “illegal settlements.”

This was echoed by Prasanna Ranatunga, minister of urban development and housing, who said there should be an investigation into the fire but also into so-called illegal settlements. He claimed that some of residents were from Badulla and said that they should be provided housing in their respective areas.

UDA Director General Prasad Ranaweera declared that the body is “working to provide houses for 68,000 shanty houses in the Colombo District [but] if houses are to be given in this way, at least 200,000 will be needed. If that happens, the UDA will become a loss-making entity.”

In other words, the discussion among government and housing officials is not about providing relief to Kajeemawatte fire victims but how to evict them and other residents of slums in Colombo. Like all previous “slum clearance” programs, this will involve forcible evictions violently carried out by the police.

The Sri Lankan capitalist class cannot solve the housing crisis facing thousands of people. Confronted with an unprecedented economic collapse, intensified by the global crisis of capitalism, the Wickremesinghe regime has turned to the International Monetary Fund and is brutally inflicting this crisis on the masses.

Like all other social issues, the housing question can only be resolved in the struggle to abolish the profit system and implement socialist policies to reorganise the economy under the democratic control of the working class and for the benefit of the majority, not the wealth few.



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