

67 families homeless after massive landslide at Poonagala Estate in Sri Lanka

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On March 19, a massive landslide engulfed 23 line-rooms at the Kabaragala division of the Poonagala Estate, near Bandarawela, about 215 kilometres from Colombo. Sixty-seven families are now homeless, with three buildings completely buried during the night time incident and nine people injured who are now being treated in Diyatalawa hospital. One resident's leg and another's hand were severely injured.

Poonagala Estate is controlled by Maskeliya Plantation Corporation and owned by the Richard Peiris Company. The estate is located on steep land, which is constantly damp from rain and continuously flowing creeks and other water outlets. The landslide, which contained large stones, was precipitated by torrential rain that day (see: Socialist Equality Party [Sri Lanka] YouTube video).

About 260 people from the destroyed, damaged and unsafe line rooms on the estate were first moved to a nearby abandoned Makanda tea factory, and later to the abandoned Ampitikanda tea factory. Although no lives were lost, neighbouring workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the residents have lost all their possessions.

Suren, who lives near the destroyed line rooms, described the incident: "Up in the mountain there are many water sources and the water currents flowed for a long period. The muddy landslide happened at around 8 p.m. amidst the rain. There are another 12 line-rooms close to those destroyed and huge stones are still rolling down. We are also in fear of facing the same disaster."

Electricity supplies cut by the landslide have been not restored, which means that residents and others cannot charge their mobile phones, Suren said. This meant that the homeless plantation workers and their families could not even request help from distant friends.

"We received some donations from the government's

under-funded divisional secretariat. Our friends donated 5,000 rupees each and also provided food, clothing and other basic items to the homeless estate families.

"There are about 10 teenage girls there and we gave them money to buy what they needed. These people have nothing to eat because they don't have any work now in the estate," he said.

A teacher from Poonagala Sinhala School said: "Some patients were shifted to the Badulla general hospital today [March 22]. There are between 40 and 50 students in the temporary accommodation camp but their uniforms, schoolbooks and all their possessions are buried under the mud. The teachers at our school provided dresses and food to the students attending our school.

"Those girls, who are older than 15, are not safe in the camp. Other residents fear more mudslides could happen and that they could become ill from the cold temperatures. The estate company told the victims that they would be provided homes by April 10," the teacher said.

Plantation workers have no faith in the company's promises having witnessed how Maskeliya Plantations and other estate companies, and Sri Lankan governments have responded to previous disasters.

Thirty-seven people lost their lives in 2014 in a huge landslide at Meeriyabedda Estate, which is owned by Maskeliya Plantation and situated near the Poonagala Estate.

In 2005, the National Building Research Organisation (NBRO) predicted landslides in the area and recommended that 75 families be provided alternative residences.

Maskeliya Plantation management ignored these warnings. The government of President Mahinda Rajapakse did not direct the company to provide

alternative accommodation, then blamed estate workers for living in dangerous areas.

Estate infrastructure minister Jeevan Thondaman responded to the March 19 catastrophe by declaring that the homeless estate families would be given some concessions and instructed the NBRO to immediately report on the incident. Thondaman is leader of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the main trade union in Sri Lanka's plantation sector. Thondaman's statements are hot air.

In 2008, the NBRO identified 3,760 extremely dangerous locations in the hill country districts and instructed the estate companies to move workers to safer areas. These warnings have been willfully ignored and no concrete measures have been implemented by successive Sri Lanka governments.

Jeevan Thondaman, his father Arumugam Thondaman and great-grandfather Soumyamoorthi Thondaman, who were also government ministers, bear responsibility for those killed, injured and rendered homeless by successive landslide disasters.

The CWC's criminal role is mirrored by all the other plantation unions. As plantation workers have witnessed, these unions, which also act as political parties, represent the interests of corporations and work to suppress estate workers' struggles.

Two days after the disaster, Socialist Equality Party supporters met with some of the displaced families who had still not received any aid from the unions and were dependent on food and provisions from nearby people.

Most Sri Lankan estate workers still live in overcrowded 10-by-10 foot line-rooms built during British colonial rule. The estate corporations refuse to organise proper housing for workers' families, which means that several families are forced to live in the same line-room. Nor do the corporations provide maintenance for these buildings. Sri Lanka's highly exploited and overworked estate workers are paid less than 1,000 rupees (\$US3) a day. With Sri Lanka's annual food inflation running at about 70 percent, estate workers and the families face starvation.

One estate worker said: "People face these disasters because the governments and the companies do not give any decent housing. You can see how many landslide-prone areas there are here, and nobody knows when there'll be more landslides. The corporations want profits and so the governments create the situation

for that."

These comments are demonstrated by the plantation company's profits. In the year before the 2014 Meeriyabadda disaster, Maskeliya Plantation's profit was 35 billion rupees (\$US109 million). If the company had spent a trifle of this amount and acted on the NBRO's recommendations, 37 lives lost could have been saved.

The "right to life," which was first clearly articulated in the US Declaration of Independence in 1776, is deemed fundamental in countless constitutions all over the world. The social reality is starkly otherwise.

In February, a massive Turkey-Syria earthquake killed 60,000 people with predictions that the total toll would reach 150,000. As Ulas Atesci, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Group in Turkey, explained to an International Youth and Students for Social Equality meeting in New York:

"In today's capitalist society, which is divided along class lines, governments are first and foremost obliged to fulfill the interests of the ruling class they represent. And these interests prioritize capitalist profit and wealth accumulation over long-term investments in public health and safety.

"In this context, it must be emphasized that all political factions of the ruling class bear responsibility for this preventable catastrophe. This is, in the final analysis, a catastrophe resulting from the capitalist system that all the establishment parties defend."

Atesci's statement points to the underlying profit-driven causes of this month's disaster at Poonagala Estate. Damaging landslides and floods are frequent occurrences during Sri Lanka's rainy season but the ruling elite and its counterparts internationally are unwilling to introduce any measures to overcome these rudimentary social problems.



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