

Sri Lankan sewage maintenance workers killed due to lack of basic safety measures

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9 April 2023

Late last month two Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) workers—34-year-old Lakshmanan Perumal Prakash and 28-year-old A. Kasun Tharaka Sampath—were killed while performing maintenance on the sewerage system in Kotahena, a Colombo suburb.

The two men became unconscious on March 27, after inhaling toxic gases, including hydrogen sulfide and carbon monoxide, and died after being taken to hospital. Another worker, Asiri Chaturanga who also inhaled the gases, was treated in Colombo National Hospital's intensive care unit.

Prakash and Sampath were assigned to rectify and clean a blocked sewage pipe (gully). To reach the blockage, they had to descend 24 feet from a ground-level manhole. Specially trained workers should have been used to clean sewage pipes but Lakshmanan, an unskilled worker, employed on a contract basis with just two months service, was the first into the deep tunnel.

Lakshmanan did not return to the surface and so Sampath—a permanent worker—was sent down. After he failed to return, Chaturanga was instructed to enter the gully where, he also inhaled the toxic gases and became unconscious. All three were rescued by other workers and rushed to hospital.

Ravindran, Prakash's brother-in-law, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) about the tragedy. "I heard about these deaths at around 4.45 p.m. and according to our information, the incident happened on Monday at 3.47 p.m. The medical report states that Prakash passed away due to lack of oxygen," he said.

"My sister doesn't have a job and so the family lived on his salary. My sister and her daughter are now all alone. We demand that justice be done for these people," he added.

Thilanka Nilmini, Sampath's wife and mother of their two daughters aged 8 and 3, told the WSWS that her husband had been a permanent CMC employee for three and a half years.

"Sampath called me at 1 in the afternoon that day and when I tried calling after that the phone was switched off," she explained.

"I only got to know about his death at around five in the evening, even though he was alive when he was taken to the hospital. These kids have lost a father and I can't answer the questions the children ask me," she said.

Prakash's daily salary was just 3,500 rupees (around \$US10) and, like other casual workers, he was only hired when there were sewage problems. Sampath earned a monthly salary of 35,000 rupees with additional allowances. Their families are now destitute, having lost the meagre incomes paid to the men.

The usual work procedure for fixing sewage blockages is to remove the manhole cover, keeping it open for about one and a half hours to allow any toxic gases to dissipate into the surrounding environment. After that, an authorised officer is supposed to check and confirm that there are no poisonous fumes in the gully, and only then issue instructions for workers to enter the sewage pipe.

The CMC does not supply airtight masks to prevent the inhalation of toxic gases or safety gloves, protective shoes and clothes to wear prevent contact with excrement. Nor does it supply ladders, disinfectant soap or even ambulances in case of a gas poisoning emergency.

Workers engaged in sewage pipe systems maintenance are constantly exposed to dangerous viruses and should be periodically subjected to proper medical examinations. Workers and work supervisors

should also be given formal training on the sort of toxic gases emitted from the pipes as well as first-aid training on other health dangers and how to respond to emergency situations.

None of these basic safety procedures is carried out or seriously fought for by the trade unions covering workers in this dangerous industry. The relevant unions are controlled by Samagi Jana Balawegaya and Sri Lanka Freedom Party, which have not even bothered to issue statements on the deaths.

A 2022 report on the health and safety of workers in Sri Lanka's waste management sector by University of Moratuwa academics, P.G. Thisakya and D.M.P.P. Dissanayake, stated: "MSW [municipal solid wastes] handlers are not currently provided with well-structured training programs and instructions regularly." The report revealed that adequate, quality equipment is not provided, and that "most of the time, they [workers] were only being reminded to wear PPEs."

WSWS reporters have been told that a total of five workers and a supervisor were involved in the March 27 tragedy. None of the above-mentioned equipment was provided and the workers were allowed enter the gully without any recommendation from an authorised officer.

The three men were sent down the gully. The unconscious workers were only rescued 45 minutes later, following the intervention of local residents and the fire department affiliated to Colombo's Port Authority, which supplied ladders.

As a local resident explained: "This gully is deeply located and always spilling over. It started to spill over after a big building was built nearby. If we had been there at the time, we wouldn't let anyone enter this gully. Two young lives were lost, in vain, because the administration of the municipal council failed to take necessary safety measures."

The funerals of Prakash and Sampath were held on March 30 and April 1, respectively and attended by their bereaved wives, children, relatives, friends, and fellow workers. White flags, banners and photos were hung around the district office attached to the CMC building where the two men worked.

WSWS reporters attempted to speak with sanitation workers about the deaths and their dangerous working conditions. The workers were afraid to talk, however, concerned that they could be disciplined or blacklisted

by senior council officials.

The Sri Lankan government and CMC management are fully responsible for the entirely preventable death of two young men and the desperate poverty now confronting their families.

The CMC, which receives an annual income of 17 billion rupees, does not provide the most rudimentary safety equipment and tools. Newly hired workers, including work supervisors, are not given adequate training. Sri Lankan government cuts to local councils, the imposition of import restrictions and the depreciation of the rupee have forced these institutions to limit or stop training and purchases of essential tools and equipment.

Even essential hygienic items, such as sanitising liquid and soap to which workers are entitled are not supplied in time, forcing employees and contract workers to buy them from their meagre wages. Sanitation and sewage workers have not been medically examined for years. Lacking alternative employment these highly exploited workers are forced to risk their lives on this dangerous job.

According to the Department of Labor's *Annual Labor Statistics Report, Sri Lanka, 2021*, 36.3 percent of work deaths that year were from vehicle accidents, with falls from heights, electrocutions and other accidents making up 12.7 percent, 5.1 percent and 17.2 percent of the deaths, respectively.

These deaths are the result of the lack of essential safety facilities and equipment, inadequate training and heavy workloads. It is yet another indication of the callous disregard of government and employers for workers' lives. Last month's tragic death of Lakshmanan Perumal Prakash and A. Kasun Tharaka Sampath is another brutal confirmation of this reality.



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