

# Thousands protest Sri Lankan government's attacks on welfare subsidies

S. K. Irangani  
6 July 2023

Protests have erupted across almost all Sri Lankan districts during the past two weeks over the Wickremesinghe government's exclusion of thousands of people from its new "Aswesuma" welfare program. Poor people excluded from the scheme gathered outside Divisional Secretariats, the government's regional administrative units, demanding that they have access to the assistance.

Aswesuma was introduced by President Ranil Wickremesinghe in May to replace the previously existing "Samurdhi" program. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) demanded the government cut welfare and other social spending as part of its \$US3 billion bailout loan in March. The welfare program, the IMF declared, should only assist "vulnerable sections."

Most of the protesters previously received Samurdhi but are excluded from receiving Aswesuma. They accuse the government of not accepting their applications for the new program.

Sri Lankan governments have implemented various relief programs—Janasaviya (Empowering people) and Samurdhi—in previous decades, falsely claiming that the measures would eliminate poverty. These programs, however, have nothing to do with ending poverty but are desperate attempts to dissipate popular opposition to Sri Lanka's capitalist ruling elite.

*World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) reporters spoke to those impacted by the new scheme who angrily explained the desperate situation they now confront.

Ashoka Herath, from Handessa in the Kandy district, told the WSWS that she no longer receives the 2,500-rupee (\$US8) monthly Samurdhi subsidy and now faces enormous difficulties.

"My husband does not have a job but we have twin girls who are both studying for their advanced level exam. Their expenditure has gone up several fold," she said.

Herath explained that officials surveying homes for the

Aswesuma program had been instructed by the government to remove poor families like hers from the new welfare list.

"If you have a motor bicycle, small stall or a small chicken farm, your name is cut from the list. Does the government worry what you have to spend on your childrens' education and medicine?" she said.

A woman who used to work at a private hospital in Kandy but lost her job because she was blind in one eye, endorsed Ashoka's comments. "I received 3,500 rupees under Samurdhi but that has been cut under Aswesuma. We've been thrown into a desperate struggle to try and live," she said.

A widow with three children from Dambaathupathana, Heeloya in Bandarawela explained that she will not receive Aswesuma welfare because she has done various odd jobs and received a daily wage.

"It's been four years since my husband's death and we do not have any permanent income. With Samurdhi I was just able to live and give my children porridge, even though I had an empty stomach. Now we're being forced to die. In my village there are several people who are suffering even more than me after having been removed from Aswesuma," she said.

H. Dhammika from Uthuru Kabillawela in Bandarawela worked as a housemaid for a monthly wage of 12,000 rupees and previously received a Samurdhi subsidy. She has been excluded from the new program. Her husband is incapacitated and cannot move following surgery on his back.

"I'm also a patient," Dhammika explained. "My husband and I need medicine from Badulla general hospital but we now have to spend a lot of money buying it because it's no longer available at the hospital. How can we live if we are spending large amounts of money on medicines while the prices are skyrocketing? How does it

become *aswesuma* [relief] if the subsidies to extremely poor people like us are being gutted?” she asked.

Confronted with island-wide protests over the new welfare program, the government announced that those excluded from *Aswesuma* would have until July 10 to appeal. By Tuesday over 550,000 people had submitted appeals in a telling indication of the extreme poverty in Sri Lanka.

While the presidential media unit reports that over 3.3 million people have qualified to receive *Aswesuma*, Wickremesinghe’s so-called relief program is such a pittance that it does not even cover the bare minimum expenses of a family for a day. Under the scheme, benefits will be provided to four distinct groups: transitional [those on the verge of being poor], vulnerable, poor and extreme poor.

Accordingly, 400,000 transitional beneficiaries/families will receive a monthly allowance of 2,500 rupees (\$8) from July 1 to December 31; 400,000 vulnerable beneficiaries will get a 5,000-rupee monthly allowance until March 31, 2024; and 800,000 poor and extreme poor persons will receive 8,500 and 15,000-rupee monthly allowances respectively for the next three years.

According to the Department of Census and Statistics June survey, the poorest 40 percent of the population earns only 26,931 rupees a month, which is not enough to provide a family of four with three meals a day, let alone pay for other living costs. The poorest 20 percent earns a paltry 17,532 rupees per month.

Hyperinflation slashed real income in Sri Lanka by 40 percent over the past year. Amid these desperate conditions the government has replaced the limited *Samurdhi* welfare program with its criminally inadequate *Aswesuma* grants. This measure, which will throw millions more Sri Lankans in to poverty, further underlines what IMF officials meant when stating that their bailout loan would be linked to a “brutal experiment” in Sri Lanka.

Sajith Premadasa, leader of *Samagi Jana Balawegaya* (SJB) and the parliamentary opposition, denounced the government, declaring in parliament that only 1.2 million people would receive *Aswesuma* benefits even though Sri Lanka’s poor had increased from 3 to 7 million in recent years. He failed to mention that the new welfare program is a direct response to IMF demands, policies which he and his party fully support.

Vijitha Herath, a *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP) parliamentarian, recently told a media conference that many of those not qualifying for *Aswesuma* failed to

receive it because of “errors” in the selection criteria. He also claimed that *Aswesuma* was part of the IMF austerity program, and insisted that the JVP opposed it. These claims are false. The JVP is thoroughly committed to the IMF and international capital. In fact, Herath told parliament on March 24, 2023 that the JVP was not opposed to seeking an IMF bailout.

The trade union bureaucracies, which are busy suppressing workers’ opposition to government privatisation measures and attacks on jobs, wages and pensions, are maintaining a deathly silence about the vicious assault on Sri Lanka’s poor.

The Sri Lankan working class must come to the defence of the poverty-stricken masses and rally them in a unified political struggle against the government’s IMF austerity measures, which will throw millions more into abject poverty.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is urging workers to form action committees in every workplace, plantation, in other major economic centres and among the poor and rural masses, independent of the trade unions, the capitalist parties and their political apologists.

Poverty can only be eliminated by reorganising the economy for the benefit of the majority, not the profits of the few. This requires seizing control of the means of production and distribution from the hands of a tiny wealthy elite and placing resources under the democratic control of workers.

That is why the SEP is calling for the building of an independent political movement of the working class and the rural poor to fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies as part of the struggle for international socialism. The SEP’s call for the convening of a Democratic and Socialist Congress, based on democratically elected delegates from these action committees, is in order to create a powerful centre to advance the struggle for this program.



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