Sri Lanka: Survivors of Cyclone Ditwah in war-ravaged Northern Province accuse government of negligence

Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters visited the village of Iyankoyiladi, Murasumottai in the Kilinochchi District, located in Sri Lanka's war-ravaged Northern Province, to speak with survivors of Cyclone Ditwah, which has devastated large parts of the island.

According to the Disaster Management Centre (DMC), the island-wide death toll has risen to 627, with 73 people still missing. The DMC further reported that at least 275,819 individuals from 84,729 families have been affected. Temporary shelter centers are housing 7,177 families, comprising 22,139 individuals.

In the predominantly Tamil Northern Province, the death toll stands at nine, with four people reported missing. Due to the inadequate conditions in the government-run shelters, many survivors told the WSWS they preferred to remain in their homes, despite extensive damage.

R. Rajeswaran, a farmer, described the impact: "We have been immensely affected this year by the overflow of the nearby Iranaimadu Reservoir due to this flood disaster. The roof tiles of our house have been blown away by the wind. Our livelihood, garden, paddy field, and cattle have been severely affected. We had cultivated paddy fields that were taken on lease."

He commented on the government's failure to provide assistance: "So far, government officials have not approached us, and no compensation has been given. We spent five days in the school shelter, but the authorities sent us back home. Since then, no one has come to inquire about our problems. Even now, we cannot live in our house."

Rajeswaran also condemned Tamil nationalist politicians: "No political parties have come to see our plight. Siridaran from the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchi visited the shelter and inquired about our well-being, but nothing has been done to solve the problems we are facing."

He expressed solidarity with cyclone victims in other parts of the country: "The people in the south and hill country have been greatly affected by this cyclone. They are as helpless as we are. They are facing the same fate that we experienced during the war that ended in 2009. We want to live without suffering, beyond the ethnic divide of Tamil and Sinhala."

He went on to describe the horrors they endured during the communal war: "We suffered terribly during the war. We lost relatives and property. We have never received help for what we lost. We've been disappointed many times. Since the government gave us nothing, we had to work hard every day to survive. But now, all the belongings and property we managed to collect through hard work after the war have been destroyed by this flood disaster."

Nadarasa Ravichandran, a daily wage worker, explained: "The flood rose above our waists. Our stored food and paddy sacks were destroyed. Crocodiles that came with the flood ate our cattle."

He described their current conditions in the shelter: "We survive on the food relief we received while staying here. The government gave us 5,000 rupees."

He continued: "I support my family as a daily wage worker. If I work full-time, I earn 3,000 rupees a day. But there is no work during the rainy season. We are now living in extreme poverty. The flood broke our doors, and our house is damaged."

Ravichandran described their ongoing hardship: "We keep facing the same situation over and over again. Previous governments promised to provide us with a

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house or land in another place. But nothing has been given."

He explained why they cannot move: "We can't relocate. We can only go to daily wage jobs if we stay here, because we do agricultural work. Everything we have depends on the income from that. We are not able to educate our children. There are four of us in the house. We don't have the money to buy land elsewhere. We've lived on this land for almost 40 years."

He also spoke about the impact of the communal war and broken promises afterward: "Our situation hasn't changed since the war ended. Our relatives were killed. We have gunshot wounds. My wife was also injured. After the war, we lived in refugee camps. We had to leave everything behind. When we returned, we had nothing. We resettled in temporary huts. There was no compensation for the damages caused by the war."

T. Sivakumar, a 50-year-old farmer from Jaffna, explained that he had gone to Visuvamadu in Mullaitivu District to inspect his paddy field. Due to the severe weather, he was unable to return and was staying at his maternal home in Kannaginagar, Visuvamadu.

He described how his livelihood was destroyed: "I cultivated four acres of paddy in Uriyaan. Due to the opening of the Iranamadu sluice gates, my crops, and those of others, were submerged and destroyed. My mother sowed 2.5 acres, and my brothers also cultivated a few acres. Everything was wiped out. We had to borrow from relatives for the planting costs, but due to the devastation now we can't repay the loans."

He added: "There are about 400 farmers like us in Uriyaan and 600 in Visuvamadu. Many have suffered losses. The village of Kannaginagar, where my mother and brothers live, is also flooded."

He explained the conditions in their homes: "Water has reached the stairs of the houses. My mother's house is so damp it's impossible to cook. The firewood is soaked. My sister's roof is leaking. We have no firewood. I went to the petrol station for kerosene to light the stove, and only four liters were available. They said they were out. Petrol was out too. People are really starting to suffer. No vehicles come here because the roads are flooded."

He also spoke about the lack of access to basic services: "We have to walk 2.5 kilometers to reach the main road. If someone falls ill at night, it is unthinkable. We've had frequent power cuts for two days. There's no phone signal. People are living in extreme misery. No political officials have visited this village."

He described how residents are left to fend for themselves: "Trees fell due to strong winds, and no officials came to clear them. People cut them down on their own. No one except the Grama Sevaka [village level administrative official] has come here. They [the authorities] haven't done anything to help. If you want food assistance, they say you must go to the school shelter. If you stay at home, you get nothing. Children have to walk three kilometers to school, and there are no health facilities. There's a risk of epidemics."

Finally, he warned about what lies ahead and denounced the politicians: "Politicians only come during election time. They don't visit to see people's suffering or offer help. Rice crops and vegetable gardens have been destroyed. Because of this, it is possible that prices for commodities will rise. Even now, a kilo of tomatoes costs 1,000 rupees. In the future, people won't be able to survive."

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