

Sri Lankan workers in Biyagama FTZ blame authorities for cyclone disaster

Our Reporters

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World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) reporters visited Biyagama, a town in Gampaha District located about 20 km from Colombo, on December 7 to speak with survivors of flooding caused by Cyclone Ditwah.

Workers from the Biyagama Export Processing Zone (BEPZ), many of whom live in boarding houses, along with small and medium-sized business owners, are among those affected. The area is highly vulnerable to frequent flooding from the Kelani River, one of Sri Lanka's four major rivers.

The flooding was so severe that roads, houses and businesses were fully or partially submerged. Workers, small shop owners and residents described to reporters the terrifying impact of the disaster, the repeated flooding they endure and the destruction caused this time by the overflowing Kelani River.

Temporary shelters for flood victims were set up at Yabaraluwa Ananda Vidyalyaya (school) and a nearby temple.

Reporters visited a boarding house in Malwana, where a group of workers from the HJS Condiments factory—a food processing company under the Hayleys Group, located in BEPZ—were staying. They noted that, compared to the floods in 2016, the water level this time rose more than three feet higher.

Jayani, a young female worker from Rakwana (over 130 km from Colombo), said: “If the rulers had been concerned about the people, they [the victims] could have been saved, though perhaps the houses would still have been destroyed. If the rulers had alerted the people, in advance, that a cyclone was approaching, deaths could have been prevented.”

Commenting on the failure to use available technology, she added: “There should be such technology, even though there are experts in Sri Lanka. But the rulers do not allow technology to be utilized.

Politicians are not concerned about the people, whether they are dead or alive.”

On the attitude of the capitalist class toward human life, she remarked: “Their only interest is in extracting as much work as possible, and they will never save people [from disasters].”

Jayani also described the conditions of exploitation at her factory: “My basic salary is about 31,000 rupees per month. I pay 8,000 rupees for my room. I've bought a motorcycle on a leasing plan, and I have to pay for that. After paying for meals, I have nothing left.”

The boarding house owner, who also works at the same factory, described how they were affected on November 29: “This time, a large volume of water entered the house. The fridge, the washing machine, clothing cupboards, the sofa and other belongings went under water. In an hour, everything was inundated.” She explained that about 20 boarders and her family spent six days living on the first floor of the house.

She criticized the lack of government response: “The Grama Sevaka [village-level administrative officer] has not yet visited this area. They should come and listen to our grievances. We lost all of our clothes, and what we're wearing now is what others gave us.”

Reporters explained that in Sri Lanka and around the world, enormous wealth is concentrated in the hands of a tiny capitalist elite, whose only concern is private profit.

Wasantha, who drives a three-wheeler for a living, described the lack of infrastructure for evacuation: “Even though people were asked to evacuate, they must be provided with suitable places. If we were asked to evacuate, we still wouldn't have anywhere to go.”

He added that the government failed to establish adequate evacuation centers in advance: “For over 70

years, politicians have plundered the country's resources. What happened in past disasters is happening again now."

Commenting on the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government of President Anura Kumara Disanayake, he said that whatever promises were made during the election campaign, "there is no difference, as far as I can understand." Reporters explained that the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and WSWS have always characterized the JVP/NPP as part of the bourgeois political establishment and warned that its government would be no different from those before it.

He expressed interest in learning more about the SEP's program and acknowledged that the capitalist system has failed to protect people—not only from disasters like Cyclone Ditwah, but also from the broader economic and social crisis.

Reporters also spoke with a young female worker from Balangoda (over 150 km from Colombo), employed at the Midas Safety factory in the BEPZ, which manufactures medical gloves for export. She has worked there for nearly two years and earns about 50,000 rupees per month.

She explained that the factory closed for two and a half days due to flooding and lack of transport. When it reopened, it operated with a reduced number of workers.

She reflected on the global nature of the crisis, saying that air pollution is caused by "emissions from vehicles, gases from power stations, and so on," and that this is leading to "the melting of glaciers." She added that under capitalism, real solutions to these problems "do not yet exist and are even unthinkable."

Another female worker, a daily wage contract laborer, explained that she lost a week of work due to the flooding: "We mainly work in tea-packaging factories in Wellampitiya and Kelanimulla, a beer-manufacturing plant in Hanwella, and a garment factory in Piliyandala."

"My daily wage is between 1,700 and 2,000 rupees," she said, adding that she worked only 20 days in November. "At most, I earn between 35,000 and 40,000 rupees a month, and my husband, also a daily wage laborer, earns about 40,000 rupees per month."

Commenting on the JVP/NPP government, she said: "There is no change in our lives. It's the same as

previous governments." She added, "We're both in our forties, and we can't expect to get a permanent job in the future. Our lives are uncertain."

Across the country, more than 3,200 industries have reported losses, according to preliminary data from the Ministry of Industries. An estimated 2.3 million people—over 10 percent of the country's population—were living in areas affected by Cyclone Ditwah. More than 1.1 million hectares—nearly 20 percent of Sri Lanka's land area—were inundated, causing massive damage to homes, infrastructure, and essential services, according to a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) study.



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