

Nine dead and 500,000 refugees

# Cyclone wreaks havoc across northern Sri Lanka

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In the early morning of December 26, a severe cyclone swept from the Bay of Bengal across the Northern, North Central and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka with winds of up to 180kph. At least nine people are dead and more than half a million people were forced to flee their homes. An estimated 83,000 houses have been either damaged or destroyed.

In Vavuniya, a 14-year-old student was killed when he was hit by a falling tree and an elderly person died of exposure in the appalling weather conditions. Four out of five victims in the Polonnaruwa district died before they could be treated in hospital as the cyclone had rendered many roads impassable. Power lines were brought down, electricity transformers damaged and 3,000 telephone systems disrupted.

Along the coast huge waves lashed towns and fishing villages. Eight fishermen are missing, feared dead. In the Chillaw area on the west coast, 109 boats have been washed out to sea. At Kinnia in the east, 2,000 houses were completely destroyed and at least 25 fishing boats anchored in the harbour have been wrecked.

The torrential downpour of between 100mm to 200mm caused many tanks [man-made lakes], rivers, canals and other waterways to overflow in areas already devastated by monsoonal flooding in mid-November. Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Ampara, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Mannar and surrounding districts were all affected by the storms.

Worst hit were areas near the eastern port of Trincomalee. At least 57 people have been admitted to Trincomalee hospital after being hit by trees or falling debris. According to local officials, 6,600 homes have been completely destroyed.

In the Batticaloa district, more than 5,000 families

have been left homeless. The Ottawavadi, Wakarai and Eravur Estate areas have been seriously damaged by the floods and 25,000 acres of crops have been destroyed. Many of the camps for war refugees have been submerged, creating a fresh disaster for the impoverished residents who lack basic necessities.

The cyclone also struck areas in the north and east under the control of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) but there are no reports of the impact. The storms and flooding will only have compounded what is already a difficult situation for many people living in these districts. Medicine, food and other essential goods are in short supply as a result of government-imposed economic restrictions.

Prior to the cyclone the Sri Lankan government issued a last minute warning calling on people to leave the affected areas but it had no evacuation plan. After the storms hit the government took no steps to provide relief to the thousands of refugees until December 28.

On December 27, amid media criticism of the slow response, Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake summoned a meeting of government officials and announced an increase in relief funds. President Kumaratunga, speaking from London, also said that she was personally following relief efforts. After returning to Sri Lanka she visited cyclone-affected areas in North Central Province to try to quell growing dissatisfaction.

The aid, however, remains small. A family of five or more gets 500 rupees (\$US5.50) for a week's dry rations. Smaller families receive less. The families of those who died will receive 15,000 rupees (\$US183) in compensation and those whose homes have been damaged or destroyed will receive just 10,000 rupees. Government servants will only be given an interest free

loan to rebuild.

According to one press report, a street protest took place in Trincomalee on December 27 over the lack of aid. The demonstrations continued when Social Services Minister Milroy Fernando visited Trincomalee to explain the government's relief plans. Most of the victims are poor farmers and fishermen who can least afford the loss of their homes and in some cases their livelihood.

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