

# India's tsunami victims left without government assistance

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Nearly two months after the tsunami struck the southern Indian coast, thousands of the survivors are living in difficult conditions. Having lost family members, houses, possessions and in many cases their livelihoods, they are struggling to cope day to day. Those who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* expressed their resentment and anger at the failure of authorities—local, state and national—to alleviate their suffering.

WSWS reporters recently visited one of the affected areas near Madras in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. At Palavetkadu, 41 km from Madras, about 30,000 people live in 24 small villages. Ten of these were hit by the tsunami. Four children and five women were killed but many more people lost their boats, nets and household belongings. Unable to fish, people in the area are dependent on the assistance of non-government organisations (NGOs). Government relief is simply inadequate.

Desam Sivaraj, 39, from the Lighthouse panchayat (village council area), explained: “There are 244 families in our panchayat. We were all affected by the tsunami tidal wave. The government promised a relief package of 5,000 rupees (\$US115) and 40 kg of rice per family. But the cost of distributing saris, bed sheets and dhotis were deducted out from the 5,000 rupees, and 4,000 rupees was to be given each family.

“However, only 125 of the 244 families in our panchayat have received the money. So we had to distribute that money among all the families. As a result, every family was given 2,000 rupees by the government. I buy and sell fish but I can't go back to sea yet. As there is not enough government relief, we have turned to non-government organisations for help”.

Satankuppam and Korai-kuppam are tiny impoverished villages located 4 km from Palavetkadu.

Three women were killed in Satankuppam and two women and four children died at Korai-kuppam. The villages are located on what are virtually islands. Residents have to cross a river to get to market or go to school. Korai-kuppam was inundated by tsunami but most of the 341 inhabitants survived because the water drained away through the Palavetkadu River.

Rajesh Sampath, 25, told us: “Our relatives in the neighbouring village thought that we had all died. But we all survived and they insist that we shouldn't live here anymore. They offered to provide three meals a day for us from the crops they grow in their own field. To get out votes at election time, politicians made fake promises about the erection of a wall to protect us from the sea. But once the election was over nobody comes here.

“Because the sea water reached the interior villages, the supply of drinking water was affected. Currently the government provides water from Methur village but that is not drinkable. In order to get drinking water, people have to go to Karunkeli, 3 km away, by boat. But they cannot use boats to bring back full pots of water so they carry the pots on their heads.”

Rajesh continued: “Generally it is difficult for our village people to get to the shops or schools. As they have to cross the river, it is difficult to carry people by boat after 8 pm. It's difficult to go to hospital at night if anyone falls sick or their life is in danger. And it is difficult for us to study. They say India has developed economically but we live in darkness not aware of anything other than the sea and our village.

“Generally there are no toilet facilities for fishermen and as a result there is the risk of various diseases. Now there is a scarcity of drinking water. It would have been good if the government had provided us with an alternative place of accommodation. We are scared to

live in this village. I am frightened by this horrific event, even in my dreams. We have no confidence that the governments that have been unconcerned about us for years will provide us with household utensils and alternative accommodation.”

Ragu Desappan, 25, from the same village told the WSWs that to purchase new boats, fishing nets and other equipment would cost 300,000 rupees. “When we were affected the government promised to provide compensation but we were only given 15,000 rupees. We cannot even purchase fishing nets with this money. Secondly they said they would give us relief funds but I have no faith in that.”

Ragu explained that, like millions of other poor people in India, none of the local villagers has a bank account, creating even more problems. “We find it difficult to open a new bank account to cash the 15,000 rupee cheque issued by the authorities. Bankers demand various sureties to open a new account. Weeks have passed but we can’t get any money for the cheque. Even after opening the account, we can only draw 14,500 rupees as it’s compulsory to keep 500 rupees in one’s saving account!”

He said that many of the fishermen were now concerned about going out to fish. “Previously when we went to sea we were concerned only about our lives. But now when we go to sea we will be worried about the safety of our children, parents and wives as well.”

Sekar Rathnavelu, 28, from Satankuppam said that 75 percent of fishermen were aware of big tides and storms but they could not foresee the tsunami. He said that people should have been informed by radio or TV when the waves first hit Indonesia.

“We feel that we have become orphans. The voluntary organisations have been helping us. But we don’t like this way of living—not going to work for a month just sitting and eating! Rather than trusting the government it would be better to get a loan to buy the equipment needed for our work. We have no other alternative,” Ragu said.

Abibullah Ashif, 50, lost his wife in the disaster. He said that it was not just fishermen but small traders in garments or food who were suffering. “We don’t know for how long before we can start fishing again. The conditions not only of fishermen but of the entire community have deteriorated.

“Since the December 26 disaster we have been

surviving largely on voluntary assistance. When that help stops fishermen will be forced into go to sea. But they don’t have the necessary equipment. [prime minister] Manmohan Singh boasted that the federal government relief would include houses and equipment but there is no sign that is coming.”

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