

# At least 26 dead in garbage dump collapse in Sri Lanka

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The death toll from Friday's collapse of a large portion of the massive garbage dump in Meethotamulla, in the suburbs of Colombo, rose to 26 by yesterday evening. The bodies of seven children, along with 12 men and 14 women, have been found so far. Another 12 injured have been admitted to the Colombo National Hospital. Residents told WSWs reporters that there could be as many as a 100 people still buried under the debris.

About 145 houses have been destroyed or buried by the collapsing garbage mountain. Around 645 people from 180 families have been displaced and are temporarily sheltering in a nearby primary school and other places without basic amenities. Because the Hindu traditional New Year festival day fell on April 14, visiting relatives may also have been inside the buried houses. The Sri Lanka Electricity Board warned people to leave the surrounding area because a high voltage power line has been damaged.

The tragedy has provoked shock and outrage across the country, compounding the government's political, which is already facing widespread opposition over its austerity policies. President Maithripala Sirisena has held meetings with ministers, military chiefs and government officials to announce assistance and compensation for the victims. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe has cut short his tour of Asia "because of the disaster."

With government approval, Colombo Municipal Council had established a huge garbage dump on a 16-acre block of land and heaped waste up to 30 metres high. Management of the dump lacked any scientific application or concern for the lives of nearby residents. Friday's collapse destroyed all the houses in its southern boundary.

A woman, who had been waiting since Friday for the

bodies of her brother, his wife and 12-year-old daughter to be unearthed, told the WSWs that no government officials or rescue teams reached the site for more than an hour after the disaster. "Residents themselves started searching for the buried people. Then the navy and police came with few shovels," she said.

Facing rising anger, the government sent army "rescue teams" a few hours later. The army brigadier in charge of the disaster site told the media that a contingent of 600 has now been deployed.

Soldiers and rescue teams are searching the site with rented excavation machinery and without proper equipment or protective gear. This shows the lack of proper disaster preparedness by the government, despite the many landslides in recent years that have killed hundreds. In 2004, the Asian tsunami killed around 40,000 people in Sri Lanka.

Another woman told the WSWs: "For how long have we been saying that this [heap of refuse] would collapse!" She said that a university professor had warned last year that the garbage mountain could collapse due to the pressure of methane gas being produced inside. "All our cries fell on the deaf ears of governments! They did nothing until so many people were buried alive," said a man who was waiting for information about relatives.

Law and Order Minister Sagala Ratnayaka, S.M. Marikkar, a government parliamentarian for the area, and Police Chief Pujith Jayasundara faced angry protests by local people when they visited the area.

"People told them that there's no need to visit after so many have died. What we got when we protested against dumping of garbage here was baton charges," a man told the WSWs. "Politicians, Buddhist monks, or Catholic priests, none of them are wanted here."

Another man, now alone with his grandson, angrily explained that these were not deaths, but murders.

Conscious of the simmering anger, the government has deployed a large number of police and soldiers in the area. Under the pretext of “public safety,” the entire area has been cordoned off. The residents are still unable to salvage valuables from their houses.

Contingents of riot police armed with water cannon, tear gas and firearms are on stand-by in nearby towns such as Wellampitiya and Gothatuwa New Town.

More than 24 hours after the collapse, Deputy Finance Minister Harsha de Silva said that the problem had been building up more than 20 years and the government had now decided to immediately stop the dumping of garbage at the site.

Blaming the victims themselves, de Silva stated that the tragedy occurred because the families had refused to move from the area, despite being offered compensation. Locals, however, told the WSWs that there had not been a resettlement program, apart from verbal promises by officials for a pittance in compensation or for rent for a house at an alternative location.

These attempts to evict people are a part of the project initiated by the previous government of President Mahinda Rajapakse, and continued by the current government, to transform Colombo into an international financial and commercial hub. The government is now seeking to use the tragedy to push ahead with evictions.

For a long time this area was used as a place for dumping garbage. However, the dangerous situation developed after 2009 when it became Colombo’s main garbage disposal facility. People protested, warning against the potential disasters on many occasions in the past few years. In early 2014 the Mahinda Rajapakse government launched a violent police attack on the residents who were engaged in a sit-in for days blocking dumping.

During the campaign for the January 2015 presidential election, Ranil Wickremesinghe, then opposition leader, visited the area and told the residents that the problem of the garbage dump would be solved as soon as Maithripala Sirisena was elected. Yesterday he sent hypocritical condolences and cynically stated that the government had been on the point of solving the problem of the garbage dump. In reality, his

government responded to local protests in May and December 2015 with brutal police attacks and the arrest of many residents.

The Meethotamulla garbage dump disaster is another tragedy generated by successive governments and the drive for profit. It demonstrates that the capitalist system cannot resolve even the most basic problems facing the masses. While President Sirisena has reportedly ordered an immediate stop to garbage disposal in the area and relief for the victims, his real concern is to prevent the disaster from becoming a focus for mounting anger against the government.

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