

Sri Lankan flood victims denounce government response to disaster

By our correspondents
8 June 2017

The Sri Lankan cabinet this week approved a proposal by President Maithripala Sirisena to call a “conference of donors” to appeal for international aid to rebuild basic infrastructure and thousands of homes destroyed by recent floods and landslides.

According to the government’s initial estimate, the flood and damage bill is around 30 billion rupees (\$US200 million) in economic losses and 15 billion rupees in housing damage. This is only about a quarter of the government’s huge 184 billion-rupee military expenditure for 2017.

The government’s appeal for funds is an indication it will not take responsibility for rebuilding the homes and facilities of workers and the poor, many of whom have lost everything.

The government expects the final death toll will be about 300. On Tuesday, the Disaster Management Centre reported that 212 people were killed and 78 are still missing. Nearly 700,000 people have been affected, with more than 3,000 homes destroyed, 19,500 partially damaged and about 58,000 people relocated to some 300 camps.

Fearful of rising social discontent, Sirisena is visiting different districts in a desperate attempt to show that the government is concerned about the victims. At the same time, the authorities are making plans to remove survivors from their neighbourhoods, claiming their dwellings were “illegal structures” and caused the floods. The government’s aim is to free up these locations, mainly in Colombo and its suburbs, and transform the city into a “commercial and financial hub.”

Survivors who spoke this week with WSWs reporters said they had not received adequate emergency food supplies and fear destitution. Residents of Pimbura in Kalutara District have refused to leave their homes,

despite the danger of landslides. On Tuesday they held a protest demanding that government authorities tell them where they could relocate and what protection they would have.

In other areas, residents denounced the government and its face-saving statements about the disaster. Gamini Nishshanka, a 50-year-old welder from Tibbotuwawa, told the WSWs his family had no place to go. He explained they moved there in 1990, after the then United National Party government offered cheap land to low-income families. Nishshanka purchased a plot of land for 25,000 rupees and spent more than 3 million rupees building a home. His family members are currently sleeping at friends’ or relatives’ homes.

“I have two sons but they could not go to school until today because of the floods and landslides,” Nishshanka said. “On television there’s talk about hundreds of thousands getting aid but we don’t know anyone who’s received it.”

A young girl said families had received letters from authorities telling them to leave the area. “These warning letters,” she said, “are just eye wash because they don’t provide us with any place to go. If something happens, the government can say it issued warnings and claim we didn’t listen.”

Tibbotuwawa resident, Dilan Sanjeewa Jayasuriya, 34, explained that his five-year-old child had been killed in a landslide. He said villagers were given no official warnings. His sister-in-law’s 20-day-old daughter was also killed. Both children died when a section of Pahiyangala Mountain collapsed into the nearby river.

Another villager said: “The only people that helped us were the neighbouring villagers. The government didn’t do anything. Many people were killed in the recent collapse of the Meethotamulla garbage dump but

they are yet to get any compensation. The government has promised 250,000 rupees but no one will get anything.

“There was a protest today in Pimbura. People have been ordered to leave the area because of the threat of landslides. But where are they supposed to go? That’s why they are demonstrating. Over 20 people are still buried in the landslide there but the government is not interested in getting the bodies out. Why? Because then it would have to pay compensation.”

In the Galle district, Mapalagama residents were hit by severe flooding and are now attempting to rebuild their lives. Although floods regularly affect the area, the problem has worsened every year. The government has refused to take any remedial measures.

P. L. Karunaratne, a postal worker, told the WSWS his home was completely submerged and its external kitchen badly damaged. In the 11 days since the disaster, his seven-member family had received only one 1,500-rupee bag of dry rations. No officials had even bothered to inquire about the damage or offer any suggestion about what the family should do.

Shyama Shalika, Karunaratne’s 26-year-old daughter, said the family moved to higher ground as soon as water levels rose. “We told the disaster centre as water began rising, and they falsely blamed us for not heeding warnings and going to a safer place,” she explained. “But if they had warned us we wouldn’t face this level of damage.”

At Panangala, 58 houses were submerged and one house completely destroyed by an earth slip. One woman detailed her family’s plight. Her husband, who worked for the indigenous medicine department, had obtained a 500,000-rupee bank loan to renovate the house. Their home has now been destroyed but there is no indication when or if the authorities will inspect the damage or provide any compensation. “Officials have asked us to remove the earth,” she said, “I can’t imagine how we’ll be able to do it.”

In Hiniduma, the damage is extensive. All the town’s shops were submerged. Shehan, who owns an old building, said people had to run to higher ground. “No one has come to assess the losses,” he said. “I saw on the media that aid is being distributed in some areas but this does not seem to be happening in any reasonable way.”

Kalum Eranda, who sells plastic goods and footwear,

estimates his losses at about 500,000 rupees. “My house has been submerged and everything destroyed. How am I going to face the future?” he asked.

M. Aruana, 43, who has three acres of tea, said her land had been inundated and that although the floodwaters had receded, the tea bushes were covered in mud. Similar flooding occurred in 2003, destroying many of his tea plants.

Landslides killed 32 people in Baduraliya, Athvalthota, Diganna and Bellana. Five homes were completely buried and 13 people killed at Vevallandura, near the Kalwana tea estate. A young Tamil man from the estate saved his children from the landslide, but his wife and sister were killed. No one is trying to find their bodies.

A Kalutara District official told the WSWS that his office was attempting to look after 6,300 families or about 25,000 survivors. Twenty-three people from the area had been killed and 10 remain missing. Many areas still faced the danger of big landslides and residents had been evacuated.

The government has made no decision about how these people will be resettled. The dry rations distributed are barely enough for two weeks and there are no adequate gas burners or water tanks.

A resident now living in an emergency camp denounced the government. “They asked us to leave our area and so we came here,” he said. “But who is going to help us? Ultimately we will have to go back to the same place. At least we were able to earn something by plucking tea from our own land.

“We can’t stay long here because they will not provide us with a home in a safe place. At the most, they will only give us a pittance in compensation.”

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[5 June 2017]

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