

# Sri Lanka: Koslanda landslide one year on

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Somewhere along a nondescript and bumpy but scenic B road between Bandarawela and Beragala Junction in Badulla lies the abandoned Mahakanda tea factory. For 10 months, this has been home to dozens of families whose houses were destroyed by the massive landslide that hit the village of Meeriyabedda near Koslanda on October 29 last year. Crammed into 55 rooms - created by wooden partitions and each no larger or higher than a good-sized office cabin - are 91 families; though official estimates put this number at 63. Here they wait, for old promises to be kept and for new ones to be made.

It is also from here that they fight. On November 1, the families organized a protest in Bandarawela, blocking the main road and demanding justice, especially safe and permanent housing. They have been promised new houses in January 2016.

There is a health post at the camp, which is supplied with water and electricity and they receive weekly coupons for food and fuel, whose average value ranges from Rs. 300 to Rs. 450 per person, depending on the size of the family. It is hardly enough to get by, said Kumari, whose room is shared by two families.

Many more families, by some local estimates over a 100, have moved back to homes in the part of Meeriyabedda village that was not destroyed by the landslide but is still at high risk. After months of living in a nearby school, they returned to homes in the shadow of the landslip. While new houses are under construction for those living in the tea factory, no definitive measures are being taken yet for those who have been compelled to return to Meeriyabedda. A local schoolteacher said: "They have been asked to move but where do they go?" There is a real danger that these families may be forgotten; until disaster strikes again.

## Temporary housing

Meeriyabedda is a tragic symptom of two inter-related sets of crises -the agro-ecological and political economic - that have enveloped the up country plantation sector. The first arises from unsustainable, extractive and harmful cultivation practices, further underlined by the land slide in Ramboda, Nuwara Eliya, in late September that claimed seven lives.

The second is connected with declining yield, persistent poverty, plantation management issues and volatility in tea markets, among other factors.

The latest manifestation of the crisis on this front is the prolonged deadlock over the latest bi-annual collective agreement between plantation companies and unions over wages and other benefits.

Jagan, in his late fifties, who claims to have worked for over 30 years in plantations was candid: "There is no real future in plantation work."

In the shadow of these crises, the survivors of Meeriyabedda in the Mahakanda factory are demanding that their new safe and permanent houses be handed over in January as promised. At the construction site, on land allocated by the company around 10 km away, some 200 army personnel are at work building 75 houses, each 550 sq feet and built on seven perches of land. The officer-in-charge claimed, weather permitting, they will deliver the houses in January.

While the houses may well be delivered, there is no sign that other demands will be answered. A compensation of Rs. 100,000 has been awarded for those dead but no compensation has been offered for jewellery or savings destroyed or for loss of cattle, poultry or other livelihood-related assets. Questions also remain over the long-term care of children who were orphaned.

The survivors are also demanding to know what happened to the millions of rupees worth of aid, in cash and kind, extended by individuals, voluntary organizations and foreign governments.

### **Assistance missing**

Standing outside the Mahakanda factory, Murali, a survivor commented sardonically: "True, many people took care of us and helped, but in the process, they also helped themselves." A principal of a local school was more forthright when he likened what happened in Meeriyabedda to the infamous [Helping Hambantota' case, alleging that many government officials and politicians had misappropriated aid. The landslide left 37 people dead, many of them documented as missing, as the search was called off after the body of one child and only body parts of five others were identified. The company that owns the plantation, according to many survivors, has refused to pay the coffin money' of Rs. 2000 on the grounds that there were no funerals as such.](#)

Refusing to accept the company's attitude, Maha, in her 30s, said she has filed a case with the Department of Labour, demanding 'coffin money' from the company as well as a payment from a workers' welfare fund that compensates in cases of the death of workers. As Guru, another survivor noted angrily, the fund was created from the workers' contributions but they were now being denied benefits. Maha said, even though representatives of neither the company nor the committee overseeing the welfare fund have not yet appeared before the labour inquiry, she would not give up.

### **Corporate responsibility**

More than a year after the landslide, Meeriyabedda also raises many larger questions, including those related to corporate responsibility and accountability of State and non-State agencies. More than anything else, it underlines how for plantation communities in the up country -historically disadvantaged by virtue of their ethno-national origins, poverty and caste - development has unfolded largely as a sequel to a disaster. Being part of an industry that accounts for such a significant share of national exports and a central source of foreign exchange, precious little had been done to change their status, among the poorest communities in Sri Lanka.

In the face of the multiple crises, Jagan said giving their children a good education was their best hope but saw no way of doing that in Badulla. A local school principal noted that the region remains very poorly served in terms of education infrastructure but also that few students can afford to stay in school beyond O/ L.

Thus, a combination of systemic exclusion and cascading inter-generational disadvantage further marginalise a community long in the grip of an extractive company-state and a parochial patronage-based trade union politics.

Yet, as Murali asserted: “We are not going to just sit here and wait.” The collective spirit to fight for their rights and the individual determination of people like Maha may offer the best hope yet for the Merriyabedda survivors.

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\*<http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2015/11/15/fea11.asp>

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