

Sri Lanka: From despair to devastation in Uva

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“They say tea exports bring high revenue to our country. For generations we have been slogging in these tea estates day after day, but our lives have not changed in the last 100 years.”

“This is where the land slipped,” said Kiruba, a school teacher, pointing to a huge area of reddish soil that a bulldozer was trying to iron out. “All this soil must have slid from there,” he deduced, gazing at an empty patch that stands out from the surrounding green hills.

Massive boulders rest where homes of over 60 families once stood. Soiled books, a crushed three-wheeler, ruins of a lone home and a dish antenna peep out of the soil as sole remains from the site’s past.

Gripped in shock, fear

A week after being swept by a landslide — at least 12 people died and nearly a 100 went missing in the October 29 incident — the village of Meeriyabedda in Sri Lanka’s Uva Province is gripped in shock and fear. The victims and their families are predominantly from Sri Lanka’s plantation Tamil community, now called ‘Tamils of Recent Indian Origin’. The British brought their ancestors from South India to work in Sri Lanka’s estates in the 19th century.

Authorities recently called off search operations at the landslide area following written requests from relatives of victims. W. A. Sarath Lal Kumara, spokesperson of Sri Lanka’s official Disaster Management Centre, said: “Nearly a 100 are still missing. Some of them are not registered in our records.”

Following the disaster, Reuters had reported that despite having received early warning about the imminent danger to the area, district officials did not effectively relay the message to villagers. Residents too said the absence of clear warning signs worsened the situation. Even as immediate relief material comes in from different sources — the Indian government handed over relief worth LKR five million (approximately \$40,000) — the question of safe housing looms large for residents.

Efforts for alternative housing are reportedly on. However, one of those displaced by the disaster, M. Yoganathan, has not heard much else. “They say we will get new homes, but we don’t know if it will be an apartment, an independent home, or a line room like before,” says the father of three, temporarily residing at a nearby school along with others who narrowly escaped.

Hopes swept away

Some of them have lost family members, while others have lost homes and belongings. “We were hoping that my son will study further and find a good job one day. His certificates and prizes are all gone, our dreams have been crushed,” said Poochi Kamadevan (66), who lost his daughter and son-in-law in the tragedy.

“Our temple with guarding deities from Tamil Nadu has been destroyed. We have lost everything. Seven lines have been swept away entirely,” he said, referring to “lines” or narrow rows of tiny — barely 10X10 feet — homes built during the British times.

“I hope they don’t build line rooms for us again. The lines in plantations are all over a century old, the houses have fragile roofs and the walls are developing cracks,” said Mr. Yoganathan.

In most of such homes, up to three generations had been forced to squeeze themselves into one room.

Residents said no consultation on housing options have been organised so far by the officials and Maskeliya Plantations, the plantation company which that has taken government land on lease and runs the estate, has offered little support in rehabilitation.

When contacted, Sunil Poholiyadde, managing director of Maskeliya Plantations — part of Sri Lanka’s high profile Richard Pieris group — said: “If you see the television footage, you can see that all of them are well looked-after in the schools.”

Helpless refugees

One of the schools he was talking about had some classrooms with bundles of clothes and supplies piled up all around. Children, mothers and elderly couples squatted inside the cramped rooms, with over 300 people trying hard to come to terms with one of the worst disasters they had seen. Army personnel — with aid agencies — manage the shelter where three meals and two cups of tea a day are provided to the residents.

On Thursday, official sources in the area said people had slowly begun moving out of the schools back to their localities, only to return to the schools again, following an alert warning them of another possible landslide.

On the company’s specific role in situations like this, Mr. Poholiyadde said: “We have to release the land for the government to build homes. The government will take up the rehabilitation work along with us and the trade unions, it’s a joint effort.”

However, victims said there has been no word from the company. “The manager said he would tell the owners of the company about our situation. But we have not heard from him after that,” said Mr. Yoganathan.

Limited job prospects

In addition to poor housing, the absence of sustainable livelihood options is a serious concern. Workers say with erratic monsoons and closure of some of the tea factories, finding regular jobs in the plantations has become increasingly difficult. “My wife works in the Koslanda estate, but she is

called for work only 15 days a month. Many of us are forced to look for other jobs,” said Mr. Yoganathan who now works in a bakery.

The pay is very low — at about LKR 600 (approximately \$4.50) a day if the worker works 25 days a month and LKR 450 (\$3.50) a day for less than 25 days’ attendance — and the working conditions are rather demanding, said Mr. Yoganathan. “They say tea exports bring high revenue to our country. For generations we have been slogging in these tea estates day after day, but our lives have not changed in the last 100 years.”

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P.S.

*<http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/south-asia/from-despair-to-devastation-in-landslidehit-uva/article6600288.ece?css=print>