

LET'S HELP VICTIMS OF DROUGHT AND OVERCOME THE POVERTY OF VISION IN DEVELOPMENT

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About 300,000 families in agricultural areas of Sri Lanka are facing a serious famine due to a drought, which is the worst of its kind during the last 50 years, according to the elderly villagers in Hambantota District. The Social Services Department has estimated that 52,100 families in Hambantota District, 39,055 families in Monaragala, 625 in Ampara, 5,750 in Badulla, 2,650 in Ratnapura, 41,850 in Kurunegala, 7,250 in Puttalam Districts are facing serious difficulties due to the present drought that has continued for the last two years.

Although official figures are not available, the farmer organizations in the Northern Province have asked for relief to over 160,000 drought affected farmer families in Vavuniya, Mannar, Jaffna, Trincomalee, and other areas in Northern and Eastern provinces. The farmer organizations say that there is a drought generally between June and October, but the drought this year is expected to be much worse than in the previous years. Farmer organizations have requested the authorities to provide relief.

We would like to draw your special attention to Hambantota and Monaragala Districts where the situation is said to be very serious.

These areas have not received rain for two years. The small farmers in Sri Lanka who are food producers have now been living in hunger for several decades. They have been committing suicide, unable to pay their debts. Hundreds of thousands of children and mothers have been subject to malnutrition and anemia. It is these same people who are being victimized by the present drought.

The irrigation development activities that have been carried out since the 1960s did not revitalize the ancient irrigation systems in this region. Instead the large reservoirs of Lunugamvehera and Udawalawe were built using Walawe Ganga and Kirindi Oya, which were utilized to develop hundreds of thousands of acres of land in the basins. 55,000 families were settled directly under these projects in the new settlement schemes. As a result of mistakes made in these large schemes, the settler farmers suffered water scarcities from time to time during the last ten years. The drying up of land became even more serious as a result of the strong drought that prevailed since the Maha season of 1999, the methods of farming that did not enhance the retention of water in the soil, and also due to the recent approaches of utilizing concretized channels for water management and irrigation.

During the last two years there was a reduction in the rainfall and the expected water was not received in Walawe Ganga and Kirindi

Oya. The farmer families suffered tremendously due to these reasons during the said period.

What we are experiencing today is the worst of this crisis. The worst affected people and the area are those in the Kirindi Oya Irrigation and Resettlement Project under the Lunugamvehera Scheme, which was completed in 1986. Over 50 % of the children in 20 schools located in this project are seriously malnourished.

Reports of children fainting inside classrooms due to insufficient food and children having problems while traveling in school buses and on the roadsides are frequent. Health reports say that over 65 % of pregnant mothers suffer anemia.

Saving children from these pathetic conditions is not something that can be done by the parents alone, as they are also helpless victims. This should not be seen solely as their responsibility either.

The plans that have been prepared in Colombo, based on the guidance and interests of international institutions, to meet various needs of politicians and bureaucrats without consulting the farmers have paved the way to this calamity. The consequences of the "development" processes thus carried out throughout the past period, are suffered not by those responsible for these mistakes but by people. This applies not only to the people in this region but also to all small farmers in the country.

It is important to draw your attention to the recent past. Between 1965 and 1970 there was a massive destruction of forests carried out by big foreign and local private companies (such as Jaffery Bros. and Tobacco Company) when large land areas were given over to them for agriculture, with no effective agricultural development. The artificial reforestation carried out in the hill country growing alien trees such as acacia, cypress, pines eucalyptus etc., and weakening of indigenous agricultural patterns and practices contributed to this situation of famine and drought. The use of large machinery and chemicals for modernized agriculture has led to reduced fertility and drying up of soil, virtually killing the soil.

Due to long neglect of traditional sustainable agriculture and the valuable network of small tanks that gathered the water during rains, drought, famine and disease have begun to destroy the entire Ruhunu-Magam Paththuwa today. 455,000 people (of 90,000 families) in Lunugamvehera, Tissamaharama, Sooriyawewa, Thanamalwila, Wellawaya and Katharagama in Hambantota and

Monaragala Districts are the most severely affected. Death will soon begin to roam around freely.

The long-term solution to this would be based on a government-lead plan prepared in consultation with indigenous scientists and farmers, aiming at protecting and revitalizing the network of tanks, the forest cover, animal life, land, the cattle, which would ensure food security and security of life for humans. The social consequences of not moving in this direction have been illustrated through the bitter experiences of the South and also the North. Failure to do so would possibly make the entire Ruhuna a dry desert not suitable for any form of life.

Asian Development Bank and other financial institutions that was responsible for the failed project in Lunugamvehera reservoir should pay compensation to the damage caused to the people and land. In fact ADB has provisions to pay compensation for such failures utilizing the Asian Development Fund. This should be released immediately.

Many different organizations and groups have now begun to pay attention to the situation of these people. Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, Mr. Sajith Premadasa and the JVP have taken leadership

in these relief operations, other than those by various voluntary organizations. People hope that this would be done in unity, with purity of intentions.

Food relief in the form of dry food rations, milk foods and even drinking water are immediate needs, particularly of the children, mothers and the old people who are weakened by lack of food. An environment that would provide the animals food and water should be built without delay. Ensuring their right to life is urgent.

Sri Lanka is not a country which lacks rainfall. It is a land of riches, where plant life is abundant; soil is relatively fertile, people have had a long tradition of living compassionately. The suffering today is a result of replacing the values of compassion and kindness with motives of quick profit maximization, replacing the necessary gratitude towards earth and its life forms with selfish aggression and competitiveness. This is not merely a natural disaster, but a disaster brought upon innocent people by lack of wisdom, dependence and greed. The message given to us by this calamity is that we are yet to find ways of correcting the mistakes that were started under the British rule. We have also to overcome the poverty of vision. ■

Movement for National Land and Agricultural Reform

On the Bombings in the USA

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The terrorist attacks were major atrocities. In scale they may not reach the level of many others, for example Clinton's bombing of the Sudan, with no credible pretext, destroying half its pharmaceutical supplies and killing unknown numbers of people (no one knows, because the US blocked an inquiry at the UN and no one cares to pursue it). Not to speak of much worse cases, which easily come to mind. But that this was a horrendous crime is not in doubt. The primary victims, as usual, were working people: janitors, secretaries, firemen, etc. It is likely to prove to be a crushing blow to Palestinians and other poor and oppressed people. It is also likely to lead to harsh security controls, with many possible ramifications for undermining civil liberties and internal freedom.

The events reveal, dramatically, the foolishness of the project of "missile defense." As has been obvious all along, and pointed out repeatedly by strategic analysts, if anyone wants to cause immense damage in the US, including weapons of mass destruction, they are highly unlikely to launch a missile attack, thus guaranteeing their immediate destruction. There are innumerable easier ways that are basically unstoppable. But today's events will, very likely, be exploited to increase the pressure to develop these systems and put them into place. "Defense" is a thin cover for plans for militarization of space, and with good PR even the flimsiest arguments will carry some weight among a frightened public.

In short, the crime is a gift to the hard jingoist right, those who hope to use force to control their domains. That is even putting aside the likely US actions, and what they will trigger—possibly more attacks like this one, or worse. The prospects ahead are even more ominous than they appeared to be before the latest atrocities.

As to how to react, we have a choice. We can express justified horror; we can seek to understand what may have led to the crimes, which means making an effort to enter the minds of the likely perpetrators. If we choose the latter course, we can do no better, I think, than to listen to the words of Robert Fisk, whose direct knowledge and insight into affairs of the region is unmatched after many years of distinguished reporting. Describing "The wickedness and awesome cruelty of a crushed and humiliated people," he writes that "this is not the war of democracy versus terror that the world will be asked to believe in the coming days. It is also about American missiles smashing into Palestinian homes and US helicopters firing missiles into a Lebanese ambulance in 1996 and American shells crashing into a village called Qana and about a Lebanese militia - paid and uniformed by America's Israeli ally - hacking and raping and murdering their way through refugee camps." And much more. Again, we have a choice: we may try to understand, or refuse to do so, contributing to the likelihood that much worse lies ahead.