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Sri Lanka

# How the Sri Lankan government has used the tsunami...

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**It is relevant to talk about the development strategy undertaken by the Alliance government after the Tsunami and also about the political structures and the deployment of military in order to safeguard this so-called development process. Do these have any relevance to the avoidance of catastrophes, as some would want us to believe? The government is planning radical changes in the socio-economic set up. Are these to resurrect the lives of the people?**

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/nssp7.jpg>]

NSSP and TU demo (30 March) demanding relief acceleration and withdrawal of "100 metre" law.

As soon as the Tsunami struck, people came out to help the victims. Rescue and relief work was done by the people, organized by community leaders and the local political leaders. Later they were supported by NGOs and community organizations. State help came much later.

Both President Chandrika and opposition leader Ranil accepted this. Chandrika, in her famous speech on 17th January 2005 said "ordinary people in an extraordinary manner organized and helped the victims in many ways. After two days, though we took measures to face up to this, there was no ability to respond in an organized manner. No, not ability but there was no preparation." (18/01/05 - Lankadeepa)

Ranil, the leader of opposition was more forthright. He pointed out, as he had told the visiting dignitaries and ambassadors that it was "the village system the Vihara, the Churches, the local community leaders, who were first at the scene during the tragedy, not the government." (16/1/05 Sunday Times)

After the first stage of relief and medical care, came the stage of rehabilitation. It was necessary to resettle the displaced people as soon as possible and to restart normal life. Here the government could provide them with new technology, new equipment and new systems. But basic need is to normalize the lives of the people. However, the government did the very opposite.

The majority of displaced people are fisher folk, maybe more than 70 per cent. Then come handicraft workers and tourist service workers. Their lives were tied to the sea and to the coastal belt.

But the government announced that the fisher communities, who are completely displaced almost across the whole island, would not be allowed to resettle near the coast. They will be moved at least 300 metres away from the sea.

"No new building structures will be permitted within 100 metres of the Western coast of the island. In the Eastern coast the distance where the construction will be permitted has been extended to 200 metres. New towns will have to be built one kilometre from the coast."

This report further pointed out that "The only buildings which will be permitted within 100 meters of coastline are commercial and fisheries harbours and religious structures." (16/1/05 Sunday Observer)

The Director General of the Urban Development Authority, Prasanna Silva, confirmed this but added "The second strip of 200 metres would consist of trees, crops and constructions of hotels and restaurants. The balance would be used to relocate activities removed from other areas."

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So is clear that even fishermen have to operate from a distance of more than 300 metres from the coast. In addition to environmental arguments, we are told that this is done for the safety of the fisher community. It is also argued that these people are now suffering from a pathological fear of sea and that they need to be kept a distance away from the coast!

However the only fear that engulfs these people now is of losing their traditional habitat because of these policies. Many of them do not have clear titles to the land that they inhabited. Whatever documents they had were washed away by the tsunami.

In the Sunday Times on January 16, a news item says, "Tourism authorities are proposing that unaffected hotels in the 100 metre zone be allowed to remain while partially damaged properties must reconstruct under UDA guide lines if they are to remain. Completely damaged properties should moved out and already approved investments be allowed in the restricted zone."

This clearly indicates that the move is to clear poor and small-scale fishermen from the beaches and the costal areas so that big tourist and fishing industries can take over marine resources and beaches.

On the other hand, the strategy of the government collaboration with the World Bank and the donor powers such as USA and Japan is to use this opportunity provided by Tsunami disaster to get back to the "Regaining Sri Lanka" programme that was rejected by the people.

Another news item in the same issue of the Sunday Times says, "Existing urban development plans are being modified and accelerated to make use of the opportunity provided by the disaster to replace damaged infrastructure with more modern amenities and radical changes are planned for damaged coastal towns."

According to the news item, this information has come from BOI Chairman and Director General Saliya Wickramasuriya. On the other hand the report submitted to the foreign governments considered 10 districts - Trinco, Batti, Ampara, Hambantota, Matara, Galle, Kalutara, Colombo, Gampaha, and Puttalam as the coastal districts with relevant development project proposals. These proposals were prepared before the Tsunami disaster.

Thus the attempt of the government is to use the Tsunami to go back to Mega projects that do not bring any benefits to the ordinary people of this country, rather displacement, poverty and the burden of debt repayment.

While the fear of permanent displacement is growing among the poor victims of the tsunami in the coastal regions, government displacement policy also shows clear discrimination against Tamil speaking people.

In the first place the 100 meters rule is applicable only for the areas affected by the tsunami. For Western and NW regions the rule does not apply. Constructions that have encroached even on the sea could continue for this relatively unaffected region.

So for the South Western region, which is predominantly Sinhala speaking it is 100 metres. There after, for the North East it is 200 metres. We are told that this division is based on 1-metre latitude contour.

If this is so why not state that instead of making an obvious discrimination? As it is, it is a rule with double discrimination.

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This government came to power promising to break from the policies of the previous governments and to make a radical change to the economy. Even in the first budget speech the Finance Minister said, "The previous government chose a policy of relying on the private sector and initiated a process of opening the economy, hurried privatization of state enterprises, phasing out the role of the public sector and deregulation of economic activities..."

"Under the 'Regaining Sri Lanka' strategy the villager gets reduced to becoming a shanty dweller, in an urban environment with all his income being spent on food, lodging, and transport costs with little or no savings. This lopsided strategy of an urban economy propelling the nation forward has to be reversed. Instead a rural economy that is anchored on local area resources and natural raw materials should be pulling the national economy."

That was the populist philosophy of the government at that time. However even then, Mega projects silently continued. But now after the tsunami, the populist paint of Dr. Amunugama has evaporated.

There are plans ahead to privatize water management, electricity production and distribution, and oil processing and distribution. The JVP have so far behaved as if they are running the show. But now they can see that without any consultation with them Chandrika is taking decisions with her "specialist" friends.

The new word for "Regaining Sri Lanka" is "Rebuilding of Sri Lanka". The task force appointed for this purpose comprises top business leaders with hardly any one with a background in science, technology and engineering. But the major opposition party claims that it will help this rebuilding plan. This leads us to the political structure that could develop to protect and take forward this rebuilding programme.

With the support of global capital if Ranil and Chandrika get together, they could challenge the oppositional forces for a while. Ranil claims that a national plan for 15 years should be formulated.

There is a proposal to postpone elections. Chandrika indicated on January 17 that there are no elections due for five years forgetting the coming presidential elections. She has to get an agreement from Ranil for the postponement of presidential elections.

She also said that mass actions would not be allowed in the coming period. The National Resources in the country such as the phosphate deposit at Eppawala should be made use of as planned, that is by selling it to the multinationals. Those who protest will not be imprisoned but, "kept in hotels and fed".

Already a state of emergency has been declared in 14 Districts, with military coordinators appointed to supervise all activities. Foreign armed forces including Americans are working in coordination with these military leaders.

The presence of Yankee forces, have alarmed all sectors of society. American military leaders knew about the Tsunami at least two hours before it hit us. But they never bothered to inform us. They did not come at the time of disaster. At that time they could have saved some lives. They only came when the damage was done.

First they said it is for rescue, then for rehabilitation, now for reconstruction and rebuilding. In fact they are here to protect investments and businesses.

Both Chandrika and Ranil must be happy to have foreign armed forces, which could contain any mass unrest against the system. The LTTE (Tamil Tigers) have said that they would not want American forces in the Tamil Homeland. Beyond that they could not go, as they expect the Yankee forces to counter balance the Sinhala army.

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The Chandrika regime has become a top heavy centralized political setup that undermines the principle of devolution. Decisions are taken at the top without consultation of the cabinet, let alone the parliament.

Provincial Councils, which are in charge of health social service, education, land etc., are not given any task in rehabilitation or in rebuilding. The CNO and its committees are not required to consult provincial or local councils. If ISGA was there then all communities and political views in NE could represent in some form through ISGA council, with its 3- component nomination. Government has not attempted to have a dialogue with the elected MPs in NE as an ad hoc committee representing the NE nor it has started formal consultation with the LTTE. Muslims who are the most affected are not represented anywhere. If this situation continues then conflicts will be inevitable.

It is necessary for the left and progressive forces to get together to fight back. It is futile to expect a powerful resistance to grow within the Alliance. JVP is taking a racist and communal opposition, which indirectly assumes that Yankee forces could be useful against the LTTE. However working masses have started protesting. They started to question the programme of the government. Professional classes have started making critical statements. We must protest against the

- Eviction of fishermen and other small producers from their traditional habitats in the coast.
- Rebuilding Sri Lanka programme formulated without consultation and against working masses.
- Undemocratic, centralist, dictatorial political tendency within the government.
- Emergency regulation, militarisation and the induction of foreign armed forces. In particular the presence of the American army.
- Lack of consultation with Tamil and Muslim communities in the formulation and implementation of rehabilitation and reconstruction.

*This is an edited version of a talk given by Dr. Vickramabahu on at the Symposium on National Integration & Economic Reconstruction on January 22, 2005.*