

Sri Lanka: Economic crisis: A double whammy for the north east

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The north and east are twice as affected by the ongoing economic crisis due to the impact of the war, but private citizens are making an effort to assist as much as they can, *The Sunday Morning* learns.

The 26 years of civil war ravaged the Northern and Eastern Provinces, with reconstruction dragging at a snail's pace due to the lack of Government commitment to rebuilding the war-torn provinces.

The soaring cost of living and shortage in essential items such as fuel have exacerbated the survival struggle of the embattled people of these provinces.

Fishing woes

Northern Fishermen's Association President S. Annarasa lamented that they did not have fuel for more than two days' worth of fishing activities and that bad weather in recent times had further curtailed the time permitted for them to spend fishing.

"Thirty litres of fuel every nine days is enough for only two days of fishing. Sometimes the weather is bad on those days," he said.

He said a lack of income had resulted in them skipping meals and that precious jewellery had to be pawned to make ends meet.

"We are skipping a meal so no one eats breakfast anymore. To eat the other meals we have had to resort to pawning our jewellery."

He said the Government must provide fuel for them to fish for at least four days of the week, but pointed out that he was uncertain whether essential food items would be available for purchase even if they were able to afford it.

"We want the Government to give us fuel to go fishing for at least four days of the week so that we can at least sort out our meals. But even then, whatever we earn is not enough given the high inflation rates. Even if we manage to make some money, we cannot buy anything due to the shortage of essential items," Annarasa said, adding that he expected the situation to worsen in the coming days.

More vulnerable

University of Jaffna Senior Lecturer Dr. Ahilan Kadirgamar said that poor reconstruction and rebuilding of the region coupled with the lack of a safety net had resulted in a considerable number of families faring far worse than those in other parts of the country.

“People who were affected by the war, particularly in the Vanni – where even after the war reconstruction didn’t properly happen – were fairly vulnerable. So this crisis is affecting them in a major way. While the economic crisis is affecting everyone in the country, in the case of the people who were affected by the war, they do not have a cushion because they didn’t have employment or any sort of income accumulation during the war time. So these factors have led to them being more vulnerable.”

The Northern Province in particular had a large number of women-led households due to the men either being disappeared or killed in the civil war and they too were among those worst impacted by the economic hardships.

Dr. Kadirgamar noted that while some in Jaffna town itself were managing to make ends meet, those in the borders and rural areas had been more severely hit, especially those who did not own land to cultivate.

“In Jaffna town, the middle class is not as affected, but when you go to the periphery of Jaffna, to the islands for example, or the war-affected Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, and Mannar Districts, that’s where the people are most affected. If they have some land they are able to somehow make ends meet through subsistence and so on, but landless wage labour and the like are the most affected because they depend on day-wage labour – mason work or working on farms, for example; such opportunities have become scarce while the cost of living has been rising like everywhere else in the country.”

He revealed that in some cases families went with only a meal a day and that future generations suffered as a result.

“Some families are only cooking one meal a day, so this is a dire situation which will affect the nutrition of the next generation. Already the people were heavily affected during the two-and-a-half-decade-long war and now it’s going to affect another generation as well in terms of education, nutrition, and social life.”

State must step in

He charged that the Government must step in and provide relief and aid as soon as possible considering the magnitude of the economic crisis and the vulnerability of the population.

“The State has to intervene. During a crisis of this level only a solution from the State can address it. Subsidies and relief are necessary; a public distribution system is probably important. I work with the cooperatives in the north, so through the cooperative movement we can try to distribute at cheaper prices.

“Also, in terms of reviving rural livelihoods, the fertiliser ban was destructive for the rural economy so now efforts are necessary to try and get agriculture going again, along with support for dairy farming or fisheries,” he said, adding that thus far no help from the Government has been forthcoming, much like the other parts of the country.

Private assistance

Nevertheless, Northern Province Governor Jeevan Thiagarajah said that help in the form of private donations was being carried out.

He said that pharmaceuticals were being provided continuously and had been assisted for over a month.

"To begin with, there is an ongoing supply of medicine through private donors. It was started maybe two months back and it is an ongoing thing and we are continuously supplying. We started this programme even before the national call went out, about a month before."

He went on to say that plans were in motion to provide dry ration packs to families below the poverty line and was hopeful the programme would begin as soon as possible and continue for a minimum of six months.

"Secondly there is a plan, which I cannot confirm just yet, to do two things. We have identified those who are classified as poor by Government agents and we are doing our very best to see, like in India, if dry ration packs can be given to such families. The plan is for about six months minimally. I don't want to confirm it 100% until I'm absolutely sure, but all the arrangements such as supply lines have been made and the proposal is pending with the donor."

A programme to make available cooked food at discounted prices is also in the pipeline, with Thiagarajah pointing out that all these were being done with the help of private donors.

"There is also a proposal to provide cooked meals at a 30% reduced price. There are about three categories of food - things like kanji. These three things are ongoing at the moment. These are all through private donors who are residing abroad."

Dire straits

According to Karainagar Ambal Fisheries Cooperative Union President Kanthasamy Rajachandran, the current economic crisis in the country has not just led to an increase in food item prices, but even that of fuel - petrol, diesel, and kerosene - which are sources of energy for their boats.

"Added to the issue of price increase, there is an issue of fuel distribution as well. Fishermen do not get fuel regularly, which has affected their livelihoods badly. Fish stocks have also depleted. Similar to the Government's economic crisis, fishermen were pushed into this crisis at a time when they could not engage in fishing properly. Thereby, they catch only a few fish and are pushed into a situation where they have to sell it for a higher price," he added.

Citing an example, he said that his union also engages in dry fish production, but that the situation was such that they could not get the fish needed for said dry fish production.

"Fishermen, daily wage earners who rely on the fishermen, and small-scale fish sellers are heavily impacted by this crisis. Their livelihoods are badly affected. Fishermen's lives are in crisis.

"In the coming weeks, there will be more fish in the sea due to the wind, which will create some opportunities for the fishermen, but we cannot even increase fish prices despite rising expenses. When people buy fish they do not consider our expenses and when we increase the price they are reluctant to purchase.

"Most fishermen have been pushed into a state where they cannot go to sea and as a result many - especially widowed mothers, who rely on these fishermen to engage in production such as dry fish production - are further affected," he said.

Due to the crisis in the country, people were trying to survive through Multi Purpose Cooperative Societies (MPCSs), prioritising their purchases to buy whatever was relatively cheaper, he pointed out.

"There is a fear among people since the prices keep increasing on a daily basis. We don't know who

is going to solve these problems,” he added.

When there used to be less fish in the sea, most of the fishermen would engage in mason work or work for daily wages in the village. “But now with the increase in cement prices, these fishermen cannot even go for mason work or work as daily wage earners as employers are struggling to pay wages.”

He pointed out that children’s education had also been impacted. “Children cannot afford to buy books and notebooks or pay tuition fees and transportation costs.”

Outlining possible solutions, he called on the Government to provide the three types of fuel, without which their livelihoods were affected, while also requesting price controls for nets.

“There is a need to stabilise prices; even small things like thread are more expensive now. We have a new Prime Minister, but we are not sure what he can and will do about these issues. He has to do something, but whether he will do it is the question. They should look at giving us subsidised fuel and reduce prices of nets and raw materials for nets. This will help the fishermen live.”

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