Authorities’ promises stink as much as garbage mountain

We need to breathe fresh air like we did 20 years ago, says resident

Growing up amidst garbage: These children are all smiles but face severe health hazards. Pix by M.A. Pushpa Kumara

K. Keerthiran Perera

Residents have launched several protests to discourage dumping of garbage in the area as the authorities fail to act as there is no proper disposal site in the country. Thirty-two-year-old T. Francis and his family have been living in fear and sorrow as they see garbage being dumped near their home every day.

Francis’s 12-year-old daughter, Sarah, has not gone to school for two weeks in a row. This is normal for children in the area. Her 11-year-old brother, Pasindu, suffered from high fever and, after being admitted to hospital, was diagnosed with dengue fever. It has been several days now but Pasindu’s health has not improved.

"Life here is dreadful. My children are always sick. Most of the time I stay home looking after them and there are months I do not get paid at all," said Francis. The previous month was one such period of unemployment. Francis works as a labourer for a private company and his wife is a housewife.

Their misery grew when their house was demolished by the government. Since he was not given an alternative dwelling for his family, they had to move to a house also marked for demolition. His owners were evicted last month.

Such residents are given Rs. 45,000 to move to a house and have been promised new homes worth Rs. 250,000.

"We were promised of better times, but even if my children die of illnesses these politicians wouldn’t bat an eyelid," Francis said.

According to the Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) 300,000 people arrive in Colombo from all parts of the country daily. During the day, a population of one million to 1.5 million inhabits the capital city. They leave more than 750 tons of garbage each day. The CMC said that residents of Meethotamulla had taken to the streets to protest against the dumping of garbage since the government decided to use the area as a disposal site.

The local children’s education is also being affected. Of the 160 children enrolled at Meethotamulla’s St. Rahula Primary School only 30% of them attend daily classes, according to Principal P. Wijesundera.

He said that this was because the students were constantly falling sick. Respiratory illnesses and rashes were common. A large number of students had dropped out of school each year.

A protest, "Fighting for a garbage-free future," was launched by the People’s Movement against the Meethotamulla, Kolonawwa Garbage Dump on June 28. Although the villagers gathered to protest, the issue was solved by the authorities promising a fast solution.

"Last year when houses started breaking we protested and asked relevant authorities to stop dumping garbage here. We were promised it would stop, but we were left high and dry," said Pasindu, adding that if the government failed to continue disposing garbage by next month the residents would launch a massive protest and fight until they are provided with a favourable solution.

Meanwhile, Ashok Gunawardena, lawyer specialising in environmental issues, said that under government ordinances the CMC and Kolonawwa Municipal Council are responsible for eradicating a public nuisance.

"They have a statutory obligation to stop this and take action. This is a hazardous open dump and they have to take steps to dispose of the garbage in a proper manner," he said adding that if the authorities failed to do so, affected parties could take them to court.

The Commissioner to the CMC, Bhadrani Jayawardena, said that if the authorities took action several years ago to find a proper disposal site the situation wouldn’t have escalad. She said that the CMC had initiated several projects to resolve the matter.

"We have started to separate the garbage and recycling paper waste. But we cannot solve this problem," she said.

The waste disposal problem is not limited to Colombo. Lately the suburbs have started experiencing a crisis of a different sort.

Garbage in these areas is disposed of at a dumping site at Karadiya. The Borella–Karadiya Urban Council also dumps its garbage here. Its Chairperson, Anura Premathilake, said there were problems.

"We informed the Western Province Waste Management Authority about the problem but as we do not have a permanent place we continue to dump garbage in Karadiya," he said adding that they are seeking a better solution to the issue of increasing garbage.

The Deputy Chairman of Kesbewa Urban Council, Hemal Devapriya, said that soon Kesbewa will also be affected by the problem but this is in several other areas. In Karadiya a part of the garbage is recycled or composted but a large part still remains. In the future we will not have space to dump our garbage. It will be a big issue then," he said.

R.S. Menike: Witnessed the metamorphosis of the garbage dump

The proposed Puttalam project is not the answer to the country’s garbage problem, says the Executive Director of Centre for Environmental Justice, Hemantha Wijesinghe.

Arakkakul in Puttalam is an archaelogical site situated in the middle of the garbage dump. It is also home to a number of endangered species. The site is a permanent waste site which is now being used to dispose of waste.

The country is not making any effort to transport garbage to the site. The government needs to find a permanent solution to the garbage problem in Puttalam.

"We need a permanent solution to the garbage problem. We have started a project called Waste for Energy. Again, this is not a successful project because there is still a lot of garbage. The government has not made any effort to transport garbage to the site. The government needs to find a permanent solution to the garbage problem in Puttalam."