

## Asia/ Sri Lanka

### Victims of sea erosion

*An interview with Melanie Costa, a woman from a fishing community in Wennappuwa, Sri Lanka*

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We met Melanie Costa of Wennappuwa, Sri Lanka at the South India Fisherfolk Festival organized by the South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies (SIFFS) at Trivandrum, from 14 to 16 September 2002. She was there with a group of six others from Sri Lanka. The group comprised fisherwomen, as well as representatives of the National Union of Fishermen and the NGO, the Fisheries Development Solidarity Centre.

Melanie Costa is the wife of a deep-sea fisherman. She has had to face a lot in the past few years. A couple of years ago her husband was arrested by the Indian authorities for straying into Indian waters. The families of arrested fishermen, with the support of NGOs and unions in Sri Lanka, had worked hard to pressurize the Sri Lankan government to secure their speedy release. However, it was 11 months before he, and the others of the crew, were released.

For Melanie, with three young children, this meant that she had to go out and find work to earn money, to feed and educate her children. The work she found was in a tile-making unit.

This was not the end of her troubles. A few months later her house, along with the houses of about 30 other families, were washed away by the sea. With this was washed away all their life's earnings and possessions. Their entire village has been under threat from sea erosion and the villagers have long been demanding groynes and other structures to check the erosion.

Overnight they found themselves without a roof over their heads. People came to their help fortunately, and someone offered them a place to put up their tents temporarily. While this helped them tide over the immediate problem of a place to stay, there were other problems. Returning after work in the tile-making unit, Melanie would often find that pigs had entered her tent and eaten up the rice she had cooked for their meals.

The families decided to organize themselves, and with the support of NGOs they began their struggle for recognition of their rights as citizens, as human beings and as women. On March 8, International Women's Day, they went as a group to meet the district government officer. He gave them a sympathetic hearing and also a letter to be given to the minister, mentioning a piece of land that was shortly to be acquired by the government as a possible location to rehabilitate the displaced families.

While continuing the process of contacting government officials and ruling party members, the displaced families, in the face of few other alternatives, decided to occupy the land.



However, the land owner filed a case for eviction. The case was now in court. According to the law, if a land is occupied for three months, those occupying it cannot be evicted. The land owner, however, had filed a case against the encroachment within just eight days.

With the help of a lawyer and free legal help from an NGO, the group was able to get several stay orders that delayed the case from coming up for a hearing for three months. When the case finally came up for hearing, the judge asked them to produce a copy of the gazette notification declaring that the government had acquired the said land.

Unfamiliar with the legal jargon, the group assumed that what was needed was a cassette and they even gave one to the judge! This has now become a big joke enjoyed heartily by the community.

In the subsequent period the group and the supporters from NGOs spent many days in Colombo meeting with government officials and ministers. They finally received an assurance that the gazette notification for acquiring the said land would soon be published. However, aware that they would need a printed copy of the gazette notification in court, they did not let the matter rest there. They went to the government printing press and got a copy of the gazette notification as soon as it was ready, directly from the printer.

This was how they finally managed to gain possession of the land. For the judges the settlement of the case came as a relief as well, as during the hearing of the case they had had to contend with the large numbers present in court—all the members of the displaced families, including children and the aged, as well as their supporters.

Even as this struggle has come to a close, they are readying for the next one. On the land given to them even basic facilities like electricity, water and sanitation are lacking. To get these facilities will be another struggle.