

Decent living conditions remain a mirage for refugee camp residents

In the absence of adequate number of toilets, many men, women and children at the Sri Lankan refugee camp at Thiruvathavur are forced to defecate in open spaces; this is not merely an issue of insufficient and unhygienic toilets but a serious health issue for the residents, says an activist

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Despite Madurai district having been declared open defecation-free (ODF) in 2017, the conditions inside the Sri Lankan refugee camp at Thiruvathavur in Melur taluk look otherwise, says an activist.

Though a large number of people, 555 families - 943 men, 800 women and 289 children - reside there, toilet facilities for this many are very poor in the camp, says A. Veronica Mary, a health activist based in Madurai.

These are longtime residents of the camp - they have been living here all these years without basic

facilities such as good sanitation and housing facilities. For the more than 2,000 residents, only 20 toilets are in usable condition.

When the camp was opened in 2003, there were seven bathrooms and as many toilets. In 2022, when 30 new concrete houses were built to accommodate more people, 10 additional toilets were constructed. But, currently not more than 20 toilets are usable. So, many men, women and children have no other option but to defecate in open spaces, Ms. Mary says.

This is not merely an issue of insufficient and unhygienic toilets and bathrooms, but a serious health



Suffering for long: For the more than 2,000 residents of the Sri Lankan refugee camp at Thiruvathavur in Madurai district, only 20 toilets are in usable condition.

issue for the residents of the camp. "Women who fall sick frequently suspect that infection from open defecation must be the rea-

son," she says.

When a child died from collapse of a poorly-maintained camp building in 2014, the residents thought

Heat from asbestos roof gets absorbed into the houses and causes health issues to the women

it will serve as a wake-up call for the officials concerned and hoped for a turnaround of the abysmal conditions in the camp. But it never happened. So, these people continue to suffer.

Apart from the toilet issue, there is lacunae on many fronts - the houses have asbestos roof which have been proved harmful, untreated water, unclean surroundings... so, the residents - young and old - stand every chance of get-

ting sick.

Heat from the asbestos roof gets absorbed into the houses and causes health issues to the women as they are the ones who stay indoors all the time. "Asbestos is known to cause fatal diseases such as asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma, the damaged and cracked asbestos roofing in most of the houses can cause any of these diseases to the residents," the activist avers.

But, officials, when contacted, say they pay regular visits to the refugee camp to ensure that the inmates get their supply of essentials. As and when funds are received, repair works are being carried out at the camp," they say.