

20,000 families homeless as dam bursts in Sri Lanka
(1986, April 21) The Toronto star.

THE TORONTO STAR, MONDAY, APRIL 21, 1986/A3

20,000 families homeless as dam bursts in Sri Lanka

COLOMBO (AP) — Up to 20,000 families were reported homeless and police fear 100 were killed yesterday when a huge reservoir hundreds of years old burst its earthen embankment.

K.D.P. Perera, Irrigation Department director, told a reporter for the English-language newspaper Daily News that a crack in the embankment was reported two months ago and was being investigated.

"There's a special duty officer monitoring the embankment," the reporter quoted Perera saying. "I don't know how this could happen."

The embankment burst at 4 a.m., sending a wall of water rush-

ing through the nearby town of Kantalai, about 200 kilometres (125 miles) northeast of Colombo, the capital.

Hours later, water was still tearing through the farming community, Daily News reporter K.D.D. Jayasekera said.

The water was sweeping away animal carcasses and buildings and uprooting trees, he said.

State radio estimated 18,000 to 20,000 families were left homeless but gave no death toll. Jayasekera said police told him they feared 100 people were dead, but no bodies were recovered.

"Most of the bodies will be washed into the sea," he said.

"A few naval boats and a helicopter are here but they can't

reach the large number of people who are marooned."

The reservoir, one of the largest in the island country off the tip of India, was filled to capacity with water for irrigating rice and sugar cane crops, government officials said.

The officials said the earthen embankment around the reservoir gave way at one of the four sluices.

Jayasekera said when he first received word of the reservoir bursting, the breach in the embankment reportedly was about nearly seven metres (22 feet) wide. He said when he reached the scene five hours later the gap had widened to more than 160 metres (520 feet).

The area around the breach resembled a vast lake, with rice paddies covered by the water, He said. Witnesses said part of a main road and railway tracks were washed away.

Jayasekera quoted a woman saying she heard what seemed to be a "roar of wind" and opened her door to find knee-deep water. She and her family fled to higher ground.