

# Thousands affected by floods in Sri Lanka

**Our correspondents**  
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More than 300,000 people have been affected by severe floods and landslides caused by continuous heavy rain in Sri Lanka since Monday. According to official reports, the death toll has risen to 27. Another 36 people have been injured, some critically, and 14 people are missing.

The deluge has hit 14 of Sri Lanka's 25 districts. Though people are returning to their homes in some areas as floodwaters recede, most of those affected victims are still taking refuge in makeshift camps at public buildings, temples and churches—without adequate food, clean water, medicine and sanitary facilities. The vast majority are poor farmers, fishermen and workers, and their families.

The government's disaster management centre reported the number of people affected as 328,913, or 82,687 families. Many of the deaths in the central hills district were due to the landslides, including in the Matale, Badulla, Nuwara Eliya and Kandy districts. Eight deaths were reported in Matale alone. Nearly 400 houses have been completely destroyed and 4,782 partially damaged. Some roads in these areas are impassable.

Students sitting for ordinary level exams have also been badly affected. In some areas the exams were cancelled.

The rainfall was widespread, not just in the districts that are usually deluged by the North-East monsoon. Overflowing irrigation tanks and dams, which had not been properly maintained, magnified the impact of the natural disaster. The authorities failed to forewarn people about the dangers.

The National Building Research Bureau (NBRB) had marked some areas for the eviction of residents due to the danger of landslides. Every year the NBRB makes such announcements, but the government has done nothing to provide proper alternative houses for people. Poor people, including estate workers, have no real

choice but to live in these places.

One landslide was reported in the Unugolla Estate Hali Ela, displacing 22 people. Three people died in a landslide at Rattota in the Matale district.

In the north-western province, the Deduru Oya river overflowed, affecting the Kurunegala and Puttalam districts. The town of Chilaw was under water for several days and at least three people died in the area. Several water storage tanks spilled over, because of dams that had not been repaired for decades. Many local people are still in temporary camps. The affected villages include Wattakakaliya, Savarana, Nariyagama, Thisogama, Manuwangama, and Jayabima.

People told the WSWs that water overflowed from one tank suddenly after a damaged embankment had been "repaired" with sandbags several days ago. In Wattakakaliya, Mervin Fernando, 55, explained: "At about 4 a.m. the water level started rising. By 6 a.m. it was up to four feet. Equipment worth more than 300,000 rupees (\$US2,300) has been totally damaged."

Dozens of wooden plank huts used by Chilaw municipal council sanitary workers were under water when our reporters visited the area. Several families live in each hut. Men were on the road, protecting their huts. Their families had gone to a refugee camp at a school. One worker told the WSWs: "We haven't received any food yet. Though we are working at the municipal council, neither the authorities there, nor the government, have come this way. We were provided with food by a philanthropist."

A hospital, which is a primary medical facility for the area, was flooded as well. Some patients had been shifted to another hospital. Others had been moved to higher floors, above the waters, but there they have no beds, and have to lie on the floor.

People in many areas expressed anger toward the government. In an attempt to deflect the criticisms, disaster management minister Mahinda Amaraweera

told victims he had asked the public administration minister “to take strict action against those who had neglected their responsibility during the crisis situation.” As usual, the government is seeking scapegoats to divert the discontent.

A private sector worker at Ibbagamuwa, a small town 12 kilometres from Kurunegala, told the WSWS he saw several submerged villages. He added: “Kamelwatte is one of the worst affected. The district secretary also lived there. Hearing that his house was affected, indigenous medicine minister Salinda Dissanayake went to see him, but not the poor people in the area.” When they discovered this, residents had denounced his callous attitude.

Another MP, Nimal Wijesinghe, had visited Karandgolla with his family, like tourists. After residents told him their homes were flooded, the MP had promised aid. One person said: “We don’t want fairy tales. We have no food. The water wells have been destroyed.”

The bridge on the main road from Matale to Rideegama has been seriously damaged. The Highway Development Authority then erected a sign announcing that “vehicle transport is completely prohibited.” This bridge had been dilapidated for years, but not repaired.

The Polonnaruwa district is among the major rice farming areas affected by the floods. Officially, 10,237 displaced persons were being sheltered in 33 camps. The Polonnaruwa-Batticaloa road was inundated and impassable. The farmers had already suffered a severe drought this year, destroying their crops.

At Hambantota in the southern province, a 30-year-old driver explained: “We were caught unawares by sudden floods, due to the opening of a tank sluice gate, which sent water into the Walave River. My father’s bitter gourd farm was completely destroyed. Other farmers faced the same situation. Will the government give us compensation? I don’t think so.”

In the Hambantota district, the main roads had been properly built as part of President Mahinda Rajapakse’s grandiose plan to develop the area as a commercial city with a sea port and airport. But the small roads to villages remained totally neglected. Hambantota is Rajapakse’s home town.

The driver said: “There are still many wattle and daub houses. There are people that cannot buy a piece of soap. The government has not looked after ordinary

people. Prices are going up.” He added that since the floods: “No one has come to see us from the government. They normally come only during election times. In this sort of disaster no one is helping us. This situation must be changed.”



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