

Growing danger of landslides in Sri Lanka

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Government authorities are once again issuing landslide warnings as Sri Lanka's central hills are being hit by heavy monsoon rains. On April 20, a massive landslide hit the Haldummulla area in the Badulla district, not far from last October's Meeriyabedda disaster, one of the worst in Sri Lanka's history.

The Meeriyabedda landslide claimed 37 lives, all of whom were tea plantation workers living in miserable line-room accommodation. Fortunately no one was killed at Haldummulla.

Geoscientists have identified these areas as "high risk" for nearly 50 years, with the dangers facing these communities increasing each year. In fact, the number of deaths and property damaged caused by landslides is not confined to Sri Lanka's mountainous central region but extends to the lower hills in the county's south-western districts. According to the National Building Research Organisation (NBRO), about 500 deaths directly related to landslides have been recorded in the past 50 years.

In the immediate aftermath of last year's Meeriyabedda disaster, the Rajapakse government attempted to blame the victims, claiming that the estate workers had been "given alternative land to build houses."

The claim is false. The estate workers had not been properly warned and the Maskeliya Plantations Company, which manages the Meeriyabedda Estate, failed to take any precautionary measures (see: "Sri Lankan landslide victims still in makeshift accommodation").

Landslides, earthquakes, tsunami and storms are, of course, natural disasters but their impact can be minimised by scientific planning and preventative measures which have not been implemented by the plantation companies and successive Sri Lankan governments.

While Sri Lanka's central mountains and south-western hilly regions are naturally landslide prone because of their geological characteristics and high monsoonal and inter-monsoonal rainfall, the growing incidence of landslides is bound up with the emergence of the plantation economy.

Reckless, unplanned land clearing for tea and other plantations by the British colonial administration permanently changed the drainage patterns and dramatically reduced vegetation cover, making far larger areas more vulnerable.

Total forest cover in Sri Lanka was slashed by 40 percent during the period of plantation expansion, from 1880 to 1950, with the largest impact on montane and sub-montane forests. By 1930, some 55 percent of the country's mountainous watershed areas were cleared for tea plantations, causing an annual erosion rate of 100,000 to 800,000 tonnes of soil and heightening the danger of landslides.

Parallel to this land-degradation, the British plantation companies brought hundreds of thousands of workers from India as indentured labour accommodating them in landslide risk areas. At the same time, thousands of local people were displaced from their traditional land and forced to live in high-risk areas.

The political disenfranchisement of estate workers of Indian origin under the Sri Lanka's 1949 citizenship act ensured that the safety and conditions of estate workers and their families were ignored.

Thousands of plantation workers throughout Sri Lanka still live in unsafe, dilapidated line-rooms owned by major plantation companies. The estate homes destroyed in last year's Meeriyabedda landslide were the property of the plantation giant Richard Peiris and Company (PLC), which recorded 35 billion rupees revenue in 2013 alone.

According to investigations by the Ministry of

Environment and regulatory bodies such as the Geological Survey and Mines Bureau, unplanned gem mining, urbanisation and intense small holder agriculture in the upper-watersheds have increased risks in the past three decades.

Global climate change is also exacerbating the situation. A report by the Sri Lanka Climate Change Secretariat's 2nd National Communication notes that overall dry periods are now longer, while rainfall intensity during wet season has increased. These changes weaken hill slopes. The report partly attributes the increase of landslides in Sri Lanka—600 landslides were recorded between 2000 and 2010—to climate change.

A 2008 report by the NBRO senior scientist Sunil Jayaweera explains that the scientific planning of settlements and proper regulation of plantations, urbanisation, agriculture and mining in upper watersheds areas could dramatically reduce the landslide disasters and deaths in Sri Lanka.

Basic engineering can strengthen unstable slopes. Landslides are caused mainly by deeper geological factors that can be detected well in advance and necessary measures can be taken to relocate people to safer areas. Recent advances in satellite imagery and computer-based risk analysis have enabled more precise identification of high risk areas.

Despite the availability of these scientific methods, no serious attempt has been made by the Sri Lankan state to lessen the social impact of the landslides. The NBRO has identified 3,760 high landslide risk areas where relocation is recommended. However, apart from a handful of responses, following major tragedies, there is no concerted relocation program.

Sri Lanka capitalism remains heavily dependent on the plantation economy, currently 15 percent of the country's exports earnings. As a result, no serious attempts have been made to restore vegetation-cover in the mountains, take action against plantation companies or institute rudimentary landslide safety programs.

The refusal of successive Sri Lankan governments to take these minimal measures is in line with their defence of the capitalist profit system. Colombo, moreover, has exacerbated the risks, providing tax cuts and other financial incentives for reckless unplanned profit-making ventures.



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