

Many dead or missing after landslides in Sri Lanka

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Sri Lankan government authorities confirmed yesterday that at least 37 people have perished in landslides and flash floods after monsoonal rains at the beginning of the week. There are reports that up to 220 families remain unaccounted for. Over 150 people are confirmed to be missing, sparking fears that the death toll will rise significantly.

As many as 220,000 people have been forced to flee their homes, in the worst floods and landslides sparked by annual torrential rains since 2010. At least 19 of the island's 25 districts have been affected by floodwaters. Parts of the capital, Colombo, have been hit, with tens of thousands of homes damaged.

The states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala in southern India have also been impacted, with hundreds of houses damaged in Kerala, and further bouts of heavy rainfall are forecast.

The most affected areas in Sri Lanka were in the district of Kegalle, which is around 70 kilometres north of Colombo. Impoverished villagers, including subsistence farmers, have been hardest hit.

Three villages in Aranayake, a remote and mountainous area of Kegalle, located at different heights of one mountain, were engulfed by landslides on Tuesday, leading to mass casualties. Officials said the population sizes of the villages—Siripura, Elangapitiya and Pallegage—are unknown. According to some estimates, they may have been home to 1,000-1,500 residents each.

The villages were inundated by flows of muddy water, trees and other debris. Dozens of homes were destroyed. A.G. Kamala, a 52-year-old resident of Siripura, told the Associated Press that on Tuesday afternoon, she “heard a huge sound like a plane crashing into the Earth ... I opened my door. I could not believe my eyes, as I saw something like a huge fireball

rolling down the mountain.” Siripura was buried under around 40 feet of mud. Witnesses said there are few traces left of the villages.

Media reports quoted a number of residents whose family members are feared to have lost their lives. One said 18 of his relatives were still missing while the nine children of one 70-year-old villager remained unaccounted for. Authorities said some of those missing may have fled the area.

Dozens of smaller landslides have been reported in other villages. Sixteen people are missing in the Bulathkohupitiya area of Kegalle. Six people are feared dead in the Aladuwatte village in the Kandy district. Survivors have been forced to seek shelter in overcrowded evacuation centres and Buddhist temples. There are mounting fears over access to clean drinking water, while a number of villages are reportedly suffering power outages.

Rescue efforts have been hampered by damaged roads and infrastructure. Without equipment, rescue workers were forced on Wednesday to dig through the muddy debris with their hands and with sticks. The government responded militarily, dispatching troops to Aranayake and other affected areas. The navy and air force were also mobilised.

Inadequate government warning systems and preparation contributed to the loss of life. The Red Cross reported that residents of the three villages buried by landslides in Kegalle complained they received no warning to evacuate.

Mahieash Johnney, a senior Red Cross Society manager, said the official Disaster Management Centre “relies on getting these messages across to residents at risk from landslides, by using loudspeakers and megaphones. These warnings don’t always get transmitted in time.” The centre did “not have the

resources and manpower to go door to door in the endangered areas.”

On Tuesday, the Sri Lankan *Sunday Times* described the Disaster Management Centre as a “disaster in itself,” reporting that its emergency hotline was not working. The warning section of its official web site was also not functioning. According to the *Times*, one couple with an infant child, trapped in their Colombo home by three feet of rising floodwaters, were told by the centre that no help would be provided. There were people who “need our assistance more than you.”

On Wednesday, President Maithripala Sirisena visited affected areas in Kegalle, and the government has reportedly promised compensation of 100,000 rupees for loss of life and 250,000 rupees for destroyed homes. Energy Minister Ranjith Siyambalapitiya, a member of parliament for the Kegalle District, held a press conference declaring that “long term solutions” were required for the disaster’s victims.

The record, however, demonstrates that nothing will be done for the impoverished villagers and no measures will be put in place to prevent future tragedies. Successive governments have failed to mitigate the frequent death and destruction.

Sri Lanka is struck by southern monsoonal rains each year between May and September, while the northern monsoon usually spans from December to February. Scientists have suggested that the timing and severity of this year’s rains may be a result of the El Niño climate pattern. At the same time, deforestation and poorly-built housing have contributed to the deadly toll.

Seven people, including four children, died in the last major landslides, in September, 2015. Those affected were super-exploited tea plantation workers in the Nuwara Eliya central hills district. Their dilapidated and barracks-like homes were either destroyed or severely damaged and survivors were forced to shelter in overcrowded, unhygienic emergency accommodation.

In October 2014, 37 people were killed after landslides at the Meeriyabedda Estate in the central hills district, in one of the country’s worst disasters since the 2004 tsunami. In 2005, the Building Research Organisation had warned that the area was landslide-prone, and recommended that other accommodation be provided for the workers. Neither the government, nor the Maskeliya Plantation Company, which owned the

plantation, took any action.

After the 2014 disaster, the then government of President Mahinda Rajapakse blamed the estate workers for the loss of life, falsely claiming they had been provided with land on which to build houses. The government then pledged to provide the survivors with permanent housing within three months of the disaster. In May 2015, the WSWs reported that seven months after the disaster, 100 tea plantation workers and their families were still living in overcrowded, makeshift accommodation.



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