

# Hundreds feared dead in Sri Lankan landslides and floods

Our correspondents  
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Torrential rains in Sri Lanka have triggered major floods and landslides in 19 out of 24 districts, killing scores, directly affecting half a million people and leaving some 300,000 displaced. According to the latest official figures, 60 people are dead and up to 150 still missing.

As the heavy downpour continued yesterday, the official Disaster Management Department warned there would more earth-slips and flooding and called on people to move to safer locations. As well as worst-affected central hill districts, half of Colombo, the capital, has been inundated by the rising Kelani River. In some places, the river level has risen by about six feet, rendering hundreds of thousands homeless.

Kegalle district in the central hills has been devastated. On Tuesday evening, three villages—Siripura, Elangapitiya and Pallegage—were completely destroyed by mudslides. The villages were located near Aranayake, 80 kilometres to the north of Colombo.

Eighteen bodies were recovered yesterday by army officers deployed for the rescue operations. The officer in charge, however, said no trace was found of about 130 missing persons. Most of the village residents earned a pittance from cultivating tea and spices, such as clove and pepper, on small plots of land.

A sudden landslide at Bulathkohupitiya in the same district, buried line rooms (rudimentary tea estate workers' accommodation), killing 14 people, including a small child.

When WSWs reporters reached the disaster site near Aranayake on Wednesday evening, heavy mud streams were flowing down the mountain. A four-hectare area was covered with a layer of mud that engulfed the villages. Survivors were grimly waiting to see whether the bodies of their loved ones would be found in the

thick mud.

One of the villagers said: "On the day of the landslide, there was a sudden huge sound at about 5.30 in the afternoon. I was inside my house. When I came out to see what was happening, the mountain was flowing. I rushed out, shouting downwards, with my children and wife. People were crying. Everyone had family members who were missing. My eldest brother's child has also disappeared. We are looking for him."

About 400 displaced families are currently staying in Buddhist temples and schools in Aranayake.

An elderly Siripura villager said the community was built on a converted tea estate. "The government in the 1970s divided the property among the landless people and the community was built up. It's only now that we understand the dangerous nature of this place. The ruling people give us some land just to get our votes."

Another survivor who lost eight family members denounced the Disaster Management Department, accusing it of not warning villagers about the landslide-prone nature of the Kegalle district and not conducting any scientific studies.

Landslide deaths also have been reported from Ratnapura, Galle, Kandy and Nuwara Eliya districts.

The majority of flood-affected residents in Colombo, Gampaha, Chilaw and Avissawella areas are from working-class and poor families. In Colombo, these families are located in flood-prone areas such as Vanatamulla, Totalanga, Wellampitiya, Obeysekerapura, Kolonnawa and Blumenthal.

Nearly 6,000 people have been impacted in northern Jaffna, with 17 homes destroyed and many others partially damaged. Refugee camps housing war-affected residents are submerged. Fishermen have been hit in the Point Pedro and Mannar areas.

At Kilinochchi, also in the north, the roads are blocked by flooded rivers and around 9,000 people are affected. Villages outside Kilinochchi are submerged, causing problems for about 17,000 families.

In every area, residents have angrily blamed the government and other state authorities for not providing relief or moving them to safe places.

Sri Lanka's meteorology department said the catastrophic weather was part of an ongoing El Niño weather pattern, which was creating low pressure in the Bay of Bengal. Torrential rains were now moving toward south India, expected to cause major storms in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. The heavy rains began falling in Sri Lanka's north and western provinces and the central hills last weekend.

In 2001–2003, an El Niño weather pattern produced severe flooding and landslides. More than a decade on, the authorities have not established flood or landslide warning systems, let alone initiated any preventative measures. Residents in flood- and landslide-prone areas are simply left to their own devices.

While floods and landslides are natural disasters, proper infrastructure, rational planning and warning systems would minimise damages and protect human lives. No such methods have been developed by the Sri Lankan ruling class, nor the former British colonial regime.

President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe rushed to Aranayake on Wednesday as anti-government discontent grew over the inadequate disaster management and relief services.

Promising to do their “best” for survivors, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe returned to Colombo and allocated a pittance of 150 million rupees (about \$US1 million). They then called on Sri Lankans to make donations to disaster relief funds. Housing Minister Sajith Premadasa pledged to provide shelter to all those who lost their homes, but this promise is worthless.

In 2014, the then President Mahinda Rajapakse made similar assurances after dozens of people were killed and hundreds were rendered homeless by a landslide at the Meeriyabedda tea plantation. The same pledges were repeated by Wickremesinghe during last year's general election. Meeriyabedda tea estate workers and their families, who are still living at makeshift camps, have recently held protests demanding decent homes.

Twelve years after the 2004 tsunami—Sri Lanka's

worst natural disaster and one that claimed over 30,000 lives—the country still lacks a proper tsunami-warning system. Many of the tsunami victims were not given homes, while much of the accommodation provided was substandard and is now dilapidated.

On Wednesday, Vijitha Herath, an opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna parliamentarian, urged the government to declare a state of emergency, under the guise of expediting relief operations for disaster survivors. Such calls provide an excuse for the government to impose draconian laws, which will be used against workers and the poor. A senior government minister, Lakshman Kiriella, said the government would consider the proposal.



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