

Over 150 dead and half a million displaced in Sri Lankan floods

Our correspondents
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Over 150 people are reported dead and more than 100 are missing from floods and landslides caused by monsoon rains that have hit Sri Lanka over the past week. According to official accounts, over half a million people have been displaced in 15 of the island's 22 districts. It is Sri Lanka's worst flooding since 2003, when over 260 people were killed.

The downpours have been huge. Some parts of the Kalutara district have received 553 millimetres. Major rivers, such as the Kelani, Gin, Nilwala and Kalu, have broken their banks, with water rising above rooftops in many areas. The meteorology department has predicted that heavy rain and strong winds will continue in the coming days.

Though torrential rain, flooding and landslides are annual events in Sri Lanka, successive governments have failed to develop any serious mitigation measures or emergency responses.

The present government has reacted to the latest disaster with crocodile tears and by mobilising navy, army and airforce personnel and resources.

Yesterday's Colombo-based *Sunday Times* quoted a letter from the Disaster Management ministry, which admitted that the agency lacked stocks of basic items, such as blankets, life jackets, umbrellas and torches. Health Ministry spokesman Rajitha Senaratne attempted to justify the government's scandalous response by declaring that the US government also had been unprepared for recent flooding in America.

The government has only allocated 150 million rupees (about \$US1 million) for disaster relief, declaring it would later provide compensation for deaths and property damage. Colombo's emergency relief is not even half the amount it has allocated for new luxury vehicles for government ministers.

Nervous about growing discontent among workers

and the poor, President Sirisena and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe have feigned concern about the disaster. Sirisena told a meeting of high-ranking officials at Kalutara to ignore official circulars and immediately utilise funds for relief measures.

Such official expressions of concern, however, have become so routine they have little impact on ordinary Sri Lankans. Thousands of people affected by the December 2004 Asian tsunami, which killed around 40,000 people in Sri Lanka alone, were left without any housing. Likewise, hundreds of those rendered homeless by the May 2016 landslide at Aranayake in Kegalla district are still living in makeshift huts. Over 120 people were buried alive in that disaster.

In fact, the government is using the current inundation of low-lying areas in Colombo, to demand the removal of "illegal constructions." Megapolis and Western Development Minister Patali Champika Ranawaka claimed that these constructions—shanty homes and other dwellings—were blocking canals and waterways. Compensation payments, he said, were not an issue because the homes were unauthorised constructions.

In other words, Ranawaka's development ministry, as in previous administrations, is using the disaster to chase the poor out of the capital and clear areas earmarked for the so-called Megapolis project to try to transform Colombo into a South Asian commercial hub.

India and Pakistan have sent ships with emergency relief and personnel. India, which is seeking closer political relations with the Sri Lankan government, dispatched two ships. According to television reports, Indian navy personnel are involved in rescue operations and distributing relief.

WSWS reporters visited several areas where doctors,

nurses and ordinary people were working tirelessly to provide emergency relief to victims. While many villagers have been ordered to vacate because of the danger of landslides, authorities have not told them where they can get emergency accommodation.

The Ratnapura district, where 71 people have been killed, is one of the worst affected by landslides. Twelve villagers were buried alive by a landslide at Maligakanda, near at Eheliyagoda.

At Maniyamgama village, where two children died in a landslide, Indika Seneviratne explained that the disaster occurred during the night. His family, along with 11 others, had moved to the area because their previous village was threatened by a similar landslide. "The village officer came and told us that the authorities have declared it a disaster area. But without an alternative place, where we can go?" he asked.

Seneviratne and other villagers showed a nearby mountain where the trees were about to collapse. "We are afraid that another landslide is going to occur," he added.

WSWS reporters also visited the Christ Church Boys College at Baddegama, 18 kilometres from Galle district in the south. The college is now a relief centre for survivors from various villages, including Unanvitiya, Yatalamaththa, Udugama and Nakiyadeniya. Iranga Perera, who has three children, said her family lost everything that her husband, a painter, had earned.

K. Sarath, a 58-year-old tailor from Meegahawaththa, who has lived in the village since 1982, said: "We have faced floods every year but our house is now submerged and we are stuck here." Malini, his wife, said villagers had provided them with meals and water from the school. "No politician has been to see us," she said.

A resident of Bulathsinhala in Kalutara district, said: "There was a heavy rain in our area during the night on May 25. Road transport became completely impossible because landslides and mudslides caused by the rain blocked the roads. The MP in the area said he would look into the matter but nothing has been done to meet our basic needs.

"We were told boats would be provided for rescue operations but nothing happened. Dry rations have since been provided but we cannot cook them due to the lack of facilities." He said the casualty numbers

were higher than the government's official figures.

About 30 houses were underwater at Remuna village, in the same district. Flood victims had no proper emergency accommodation. Women were forced to sleep at some nearby shops while men slept on the road.

Kasun Sameera, 21, drowned on Friday but his body has not been recovered. His aunt, C. Kalyani, said the family told police officers about his death but all they did was take a statement. "Every time we speak to them, they say they still don't have any boats," she said. "We have had no response from the navy."

Ajantha Rohana, a vegetable farmer, said he and his friends were members of the main political parties but were now "disgusted" with them. "Not a single politician has come to assist us; only our fellow neighbours help us," he said. "If there was an election on, every kind of politician would be here."

Manjula Samanthilaka, 43, a Central Transport Board driver, lost almost everything in the disaster. He said it was the first time people in his area had experienced such heavy floods. "There are lots of reasons for it," he said, "but most people think that the highway has stopped the water from draining away. The government also does not clean the canals and most of the empty paddy fields have been filled. This means that there is no place that the water can recede to."

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