

Over 40 killed by floods in South India and Sri Lanka

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At least 41 people have been killed by floods caused by heavy rains in South India and Sri Lanka over the past week. The severe weather, which initially began in late October and worsened on November 7, was due to a low-pressure area over the Bay of Bengal.

Working people and the poor in urban and rural areas alike, who have already been hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and escalating price rises in food and other essentials, are the worst affected.

In Sri Lanka, 25 people have been killed and thousands more displaced by floods and landslides. The current disaster followed devastating floods in June, which led to 17 deaths.

According to the latest reports from the Disaster Management Center (DMC), residents of 145 Divisional Secretariats in 17 districts, with over 212,000 people from more than 60,200 families, have been impacted. About 23 homes have been destroyed and 1,229 houses partially damaged, with the displaced sent to 76 “safe locations” managed by DMC provincial offices.

In South India, 16 people were killed in Tamil Nadu, according to state disaster management. Many parts of Chennai, the state capital, are flooded, with roads under water and thousands of residents in low-lying areas displaced. The rains in the past week are among the heaviest recorded in Chennai since 2015.

Several Chennai hospitals, including the ESI hospital, ESI medical college hospital, Anna Nagar hospital and Chaithapettai hospital, were badly affected and saw the transfer of patients to other facilities. Many schools and university colleges in the state were closed and some train services suspended.

The largest downpour in Sri Lanka occurred at Point Pedro, Jaffna in the Northern Province on Wednesday, which recorded 204 millimetres. In Mannar district, in

the same province, floods destroyed 13 houses and partially damaged 802 homes, impacting 3,500 families. Over 100 homes were badly damaged in the Mirigama area in the Western Province.

Transport and the supply of essential services have been severely restricted by flooded highways and railways as well as landslides and falling trees. Working class families and the poor, struggling with the escalating cost of essentials, such as gas, fuel, sugar and rice, now confront food shortages because farmland and grocery shops are under water and fishermen throughout the country are unable to work. A lack of safe drinking water and other basic requirements heighten the danger of island-wide outbreaks of cholera, diarrhoea and dengue fever.

Half of the deaths in Sri Lanka have been caused by landslides. On Wednesday, a middle-aged woman and two girls, aged 8 and 13, were killed by a landslide at Rambukkana in Kegalle district. In Galigamuwa, in the same district, a woman was hospitalised with injuries caused by a landslide that day. Her husband and their 32-year-old son were killed in the incident. Their bodies were not found until the following afternoon.

Others killed by landslides included a married couple in Rideegama Udawatte and a female health worker at Narammala in the Kurunegala district in Northwestern Province.

Sri Lanka’s National Building Research Organisation (NBRO) has issued landslide warnings for a number of divisional secretariat areas in 10 districts. Kandy, Kegalle and Kurunegala have been designated as the most dangerous areas.

Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse voiced his sympathy in parliament for the flood victims on Thursday, but failed to provide any details about government support measures. He appealed to the

opposition political parties to participate in unspecified “relief programs” in a clear attempt to contain popular anger over the government’s failure to provide proper assistance.

On Thursday morning, DMC director general Sudantha Ranasinghe told a press conference that the situation had “developed gradually” and that action had been taken to warn people in affected areas about the dangers. Attempting to blame the victims, Ranasinghe claimed that those who died did so because of their “failure to vacate the dangerous areas and their careless behaviour.”

Ranasinghe said that President Gotabhaya Rajapakse had directed him that anyone who failed to vacate from NBRO-categorised dangerous areas would be forcibly evacuated by the police and through court orders. He said nothing about whether the forceful evacuations were temporary or if evacuated people would be provided alternative houses.

Annual landslide deaths in Sri Lanka are increasing, because official warnings are limited to mere announcements and successive governments have failed to organise proper pre-disaster warnings and genuine evacuations, including the provision of alternative facilities for evacuated families.

The majority of those vulnerable to landslides are workers from the tea and rubber estates and poor peasants who cannot afford to buy land in safe areas or build strong houses.

Most plantation workers are still living in line rooms built during British colonial rule, many of them a century old and easily damaged by light winds and rain. In 2016, a landslide killed about 200 people from three villages at Samasara Kanda in Kegalle district.

Sri Lankan governments, moreover, have forcefully evacuated tens of thousands of poor people from small homes, including in Colombo and labelling their makeshift self-built dwellings as “unauthorised buildings.” The residents are also being blamed for causing floods in urban areas and are being forced out with the lands being handed over for big business investment projects.

Colombo governments have spent huge sums of money on infrastructure developments, such as expressways and new airports, to attract international capital, but have failed to initiate substantial programs for decent housing for workers and the poor, or

adequate waterways, drainage and sanitary facilities. Contrary to government claims, a major factor in city flooding is improper urbanization, where profits take precedence over scientific planning according to human need.

While the rainfall is expected to decline over the next few days, the danger of flooding remains, with an increasing risk of landslides, because reservoirs and lakes in the central hill areas have overflowed into low-level areas. There is also the danger of a major dengue outbreak, with over 1,360 cases reported in the first 10 days of November, compared to only 770 cases for the whole of November last year.



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