

Cyclone Remal hits Sri Lanka, affects thousands and kills over 30 people

Our correspondents
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Stormy monsoon rains have hit Sri Lanka over the past week, triggering floods and landslides, impacting tens of thousands of families and killing at least 30 people. State authorities have issued further warnings about ongoing rain across the island and fishermen have been advised not to sail until further notice.

The havoc follows Cyclone Remal, which began in the Bay of Bengal in mid-May, hitting Bangladesh and many states in India including West Bengal.

Sri Lanka's Disaster Management Centre (DMC) reported yesterday morning that over 253,500 persons from more than 66,900 families had been affected. More than 40 houses were completely destroyed and over 4,000 partially damaged. It reported 21 deaths and 13 persons missing, presumed dead.

The Western, Sabaragamuwa and North Western provinces, and the Galle, Matara districts in the south, were hit by over 150mm of rain on Sunday, resulting in a number of major rivers—the Kalu, Gin, Nilwala and Kelani—overflowing. Hundreds of homes in flood-prone areas along these rivers and adjoining towns and villages were engulfed.

The power and energy ministry said electricity supplies to multiple localities had been suspended because of flooding and adverse weather conditions, with repeated breakdowns still being reported. Train operations in many parts of the country were partially or completely suspended because of bridge collapses.

Numbers of villages and paddy fields were flooded in the Southern Province, forcing people to take refuge in makeshift camps in schools and temples.

In one of many tragic incidents, a schoolgirl visiting Akuressa town on June 2 in the flooded southern Matara district was drowned when the Nilwala River overflowed. Her body is yet to be recovered. Another student was only able to save himself by clinging onto

a tree.

On the evening of June 3, two young people, aged 20 and 27, were killed, and another person injured at the remote village of Pallewela in the same district, when an earth mound collapsed on a home.

At Elston Estate, near Avissawella, about 45km east of Colombo, three members of the same family, including a 36-year-old woman, her daughter and father, were killed when their home was inundated after a nearby canal flooded in the early hours of June 2.

Flooding of the Kelani River has seriously impacted on poor families living in low-lying Colombo suburbs such as Puwakwatta, Sinhapura, Egoda Kolonnawa, Vennawatta, Salawatta and Brandiawatta.

Water levels were rising when *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) reporters visited the Meethotamulla area in Kolonnawa on Tuesday. Local residents blamed government authorities for not taking remedial action following major floods in 2016.

A telecommunications company worker told WSWS reporters: “In 2016, there was heavy flooding in this area and now we are again facing floods because governments have no plans to prevent these disasters. As soon as I heard news about the flood threat, I stopped work and hurriedly came home. We always bear the burden of these disasters,” he said.

A mother of three children told the WSWS that even small amounts of rain caused the nearby canal to flood, engulfing adjoining houses. “The Colombo municipality does not clean the canal. People are very poor here,” she said.

“Toilet waste remains in the area for days, even if the water recedes, and this creates very dirty conditions, with children most affected. The politicians don't care how the people live here. We were hungry for two days and only got food yesterday [June 3], which was just

two parcels for five of us,” she said.

Dilina Kumara, who lives in the same area, said, “The government evicts people to sell off areas [to investors]. They previously evicted people saying the area was needed for a pipeline to the petroleum storage at Kolonnawa. Some were given homes, but others were forced to settle in areas unsuitable for living.”

Government authorities have declared that flood-relief assistance will only be provided to those being accommodated at state-organised relief centres. This means many flood survivors currently staying with their relatives will not receive any state assistance.

Sri Lanka’s health promotion bureau has warned of the danger of deadly rat fever and dengue fever spreading in the flood-affected areas. Sri Lanka has reported 24,815 dengue cases and nine deaths so far this year.

Pramitha Bandara Tennakoon, the state minister of defence, told parliament yesterday, “Steps have been taken to estimate the damages caused to the houses and that compensation will be paid to the affected after completing the estimation process.” Similar pledges have been made in the past with only inadequate compensation dispensed or simply nothing at all provided.

The presidential media division has released a video report pompously claiming that President Ranil Wickremesinghe conducted an “observation tour” of the Kolonnawa, Kelaniya, and Ambatale areas on Monday “to assess the welfare of individuals affected by the disaster.”

During Wickremesinghe’s visit to Kolonnawa, where many urban poor families live, flood survivors were being accommodated in a makeshift relief camp.

Residents told him that their homes are flooded with filthy black water and that no one had visited them for two weeks. He arrogantly replied that they should accept the government relief but that, “it will take five or six years to solve the other problems.”

Wickremesinghe has issued directives to state authorities to stop allowing new construction along the banks of the Kelani River, immediately remove all illegal constructions, suspend all ongoing landfilling activities, and to repair and restore the drainage systems. Similar empty promises have been issued by previous governments.

The desperate situation facing flood survivors is a

direct result of the decades-long refusal of Sri Lankan governments to address basic infrastructure issues that impact most heavily on the poor. According to a government survey, there are 1,360 settlements with 55,865 homes accommodating 87,000 poverty-stricken families in Colombo. Most of these are shanties or small houses without basic facilities.

The Meethotamulla area in Kolonnawa was hit by one of the country’s worst government-made disasters on April 14, 2017, when a massive garbage mountain collapsed, killing at least 32 people, destroying 146 homes and impacting on thousands of local residents.

Despite vocal opposition from local residents, the site was being used as a garbage dump by the Colombo Municipal Council. Government authorities attempted to blame local residents for living near the dump.

Wickremesinghe was the prime minister in President Maithripala Sirisena’s administration when the Meethotamulla disaster occurred. The government responded to this social catastrophe by relocating the affected families to ill-equipped flats in another area. The current government now plans to relocate these people again, in order to sell the land to property developers and other big business investors.

Wickremesinghe’s decision to tour the flood-affected communities is not out of sympathy for survivors but part and parcel of his attempts to bolster his public image for the upcoming presidential elections.

Notwithstanding his feigned concern and empty promises, millions of Sri Lankans are deeply hostile to his government’s savage austerity policies, because of which the figure for those living in poverty climbed from 13 percent of the population in 2021 to 26 percent last year. The current flood disaster has added to the desperate social conditions facing the poor.



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