

Sri Lanka: 15 killed in horrific Ella-Wellawaya bus accident

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The terrible death of 15 people when a bus plunged over a 1,000-foot cliff on the Ella-Wellawaya road in Uva province on the night of September 4 has shocked many Sri Lankans. Those killed included the bus driver, nine women and two children, with about a dozen others injured.

Most of the victims were employees of the Tangalle Pradeshiya Sabha (a local government body) in the south of the island and their family members who were returning from a picnic in Nuwara Eliya. The injured have been admitted to the Diyatalawa and Badulla Teaching Hospitals.

Villagers and neighbours quickly gathered at the scene as soon as the accident occurred as did passengers from other vehicles. Doctors and other health workers from the Wellawaya and Badulla Teaching Hospitals, police personnel and army and air force soldiers worked strenuously to rescue the injured.

Assistant Superintendent of Police F. U. Wutler said the accident was believed to have been caused by the bus's high speed and loss of control. Investigations have not yet confirmed these claims.

However, according to the bus conductor and another person who survived the accident, the driver said that the vehicle's brakes suddenly failed, moments before the accident. Another survivor told the media that the driver made desperate efforts to control the bus at that time.

Sensational claims blaming the driver for the accident have been published and are being circulated on social media, but lack any concrete evidence.

Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya, who visited Tangalle to pay her respects to the dead, told the media that the government would introduce new measures to prevent such accidents. "Laws can be introduced, [and] they need everyone's support. We all have a

responsibility to ensure that such things do not happen," she said.

This is a deliberate attempt to cover up the real causes of the problem, and to deflect attention from measures the government could and should have already implemented.

Innumerable laws, regulations and programs already exist, many of them introduced after previous accidents. The continuing high number of road accidents makes clear, however, successive governments have not been willing to spend the money necessary to prevent such tragedies.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) came to power last year claiming it would upgrade old and notoriously unsafe infrastructure. Amarasuriya has not said a word about those promises.

Obvious steps need to be taken, including major upgrades of the country's dilapidated road system, regular checks on all vehicles, especially long-distance passenger buses, and safety measures, such as strong safety fences on both sides of dangerous steep mountain roads.

The JVP/NPP government, however, is totally committed to imposing the International Monetary Fund (IMF) drastic austerity agenda, including savage budget cuts, and will never allocate the required resources to prevent tragic toll on the island's roads.

Promises to provide 1 million rupees (\$US3,323) from the Presidential Fund to the families of those killed in the bus crash are simply a ploy to diffuse rising public anger.

A recent World Bank report titled *Delivering Road Safety in Sri Lanka: Leadership Priorities and Initiatives to 2030* states: "Annual road crash deaths per capita in Sri Lanka are twice the average rate in high-

income countries and five times that of the best performing countries in the world.

“Available data indicate an average of 38,000 crashes annually which result in around 3,000 fatalities and 8,000 serious injuries. Sri Lanka has the worst road fatality rate among its immediate neighbors in South Asia region.”

The *Daily Mirror* reported on September 5 that a bus overturned at the same location on the Ella-Wellawaya road 23 years ago, killing 21 people. In March 2021, 13 people were killed, when a bus overturned in the Passara area in Uva province and in May this year—just four months ago—a long-distance bus travelling from Kataragama in Uva province to Kurunegala in north-western province overturned in Garadi Ella, killing 23 people.

According to police data, 198 fatal bus accidents, involving government-owned and private buses, were reported in 2024. From 2020 to 2024, a total of 12,140 deaths were due to road accidents, with the annual death toll fluctuating between 2,300 and 2,500. Between January and May 14 of this year, 965 people (or roughly six to seven deaths per day) were killed in 1,842 road accidents.

After the Garadi Ella bus accident in May, Professor Amal Kumarage from the University of Moratuwa told the media: “There is a huge lack of standardisation in terms of safety [in the transport sector] in this country.”

Buses in Sri Lanka 50 to 60 years ago, he explained, had the same standards as those in Europe but due to the cost, buses started to be imported from India. Sri Lankan governments, however, he said, had not been able to import a single bus with European standards in the last five years.

A September 7 editorial in the *Island* noted: “Close on the heels of the Ramboda tragedy [the Garadi Ella accident in May], police and the Department of Motor Traffic (DMT) launched a vehicle inspection program, and detected several buses, both private and state-owned, which were not roadworthy and ordered that they be repaired before being put back on the road. Action was also taken to deal with drivers’ fatigue. But nothing has since been heard about that initiative, which should be continued to ensure road safety.”

The fact that the JVP/NPA government has not even maintained these limited safety measures makes clear

that its posturing about the latest bus accident will, like the responses of its predecessors, come to nothing.

Public safety, including road safety can only be secured by allocating billions of rupees for urgent scientifically based safety measures and programs. This is inseparable from the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government which implements socialist policies and prioritises human needs over corporate profit.



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