

Sri Lanka: Over 330 dead from Cyclone Ditwah, hundreds of thousands impacted

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Cyclone Ditwah, one of the worst natural disasters to hit Sri Lanka in decades, has killed more than 334 people and affected nearly one million across the island as of Sunday evening. With over 370 people still missing, and search operations ongoing, the death toll is expected to rise further in the coming days.

Cyclone Ditwah tore through the country, unleashing devastating floods and massive landslides that swept away entire villages and buried families alive, particularly in the hardest-hit Central Province.

More than 120,000 people from all 25 districts have sought refuge in 919 temporary shelters. According to the Department of Meteorology (DoM) and the Disaster Management Centre (DMC), 20 districts have been severely impacted. The DoM reports that a total of 1,118,929 people from 309,607 families have been affected.

Torrential rains drenched the central highlands, destabilizing slopes and triggering deadly landslides. In some areas, rainfall exceeded 500 millimeters as Cyclone Ditwah swept inland. Overflowing reservoirs and rivers surged by 10 to 20 feet, giving residents little time to escape and exposing the near-total absence of effective early warning systems.

One of the most tragic incidents occurred on the night of November 27 in Kudamake, on the outskirts of Gampola in Kandy District, where a 13-foot wall of water suddenly engulfed a village of about 100 families. While many managed to escape, 66 people were killed and many remain unaccounted for.

Entire towns across multiple districts are underwater, key bridges have been washed away, and critical infrastructure has been left in ruins. Hundreds of roads and railway lines have been destroyed or blocked by landslides, severely hampering rescue efforts. Many flood-affected areas are now accessible only by boat or military helicopter.

Widespread power outages and the collapse of telecommunications for more than 48 hours in several hard-hit areas have left many communities completely cut off, forced to survive on their own. Television footage has shown military helicopters airlifting people from rooftops in dozens of locations, underscoring the fact that thousands received no warning and were forced to seek safety by climbing onto roofs and trees.

The lack of timely evacuation has contributed to the high death toll. In many cases, landslides struck without warning because authorities either failed to issue alerts or sent them at the last minute, leaving residents no time to flee.

On Saturday evening, a massive landslide in Rambukela village, in the Alawathugoda Police Division of Kandy District, buried about 50 houses. Approximately 50 people are feared missing. As with other similar incidents, severe weather prevented rescue teams from reaching the site in time, ending the hope of finding survivors.

Rescue operations have themselves become dangerous. In the Gawarammana area, a team of Road Development Authority workers was sent to clear a collapsed earth mound blocking the Welimada–Nuwara Eliya main road. During the operation, one worker went missing, and another, buried under the debris, had to be pulled out alive.

Hundreds of desperate appeals for clean water, food, clothing, and other necessities have flooded social media platforms, especially Facebook, from people stranded across the country. Many are also urgently requesting rescue teams, boats, and helicopters to save those trapped by rising floodwaters. Complaints are widespread that government assistance is either severely inadequate or entirely absent.

While the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government has deployed 25,000 troops, and many civilians are volunteering to

assist, the magnitude of the catastrophe demands coordinated efforts both nationally and internationally. So far, the government has failed to mobilize anything close to the level of aid required.

As public outrage over the government's disastrous response continues to grow, President Dissanayake invoked a sweeping state of emergency on Saturday, granting himself vast powers—not to address the humanitarian crisis, but to clamp down on growing social unrest. Opposition parties, including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya and the United National Party, had already been calling for such measures, fearing the eruption of mass anger.

Even before the formal emergency was declared, Dissanayake had placed all displacement camps under military authority and brought key sectors—petroleum, gas, electricity, health, irrigation, and road and railway maintenance—under Essential Services Regulations. In one incident, a military officer used a loudspeaker to order residents of the Wallampitiya area to evacuate, warning of rising water levels in the Kalani River.

The declaration of emergency and military control over displacement camps are clearly aimed at suppressing popular opposition. It also reflects broader efforts by the JVP/NPP regime to curtail social and democratic rights in the face of growing opposition from the working class.

In a televised address Sunday night, Dissanayake made a desperate attempt to portray his government as working tirelessly to aid victims. Calling the crisis “not a small challenge,” he claimed the administration's priority was to “rebuild the country in the short, medium and long term.” In reality, this is a cynical cover-up of his government's gross failure to manage the disaster and provide meaningful aid.

Defending the state of emergency, Dissanayake claimed it was necessary to “provide the legal protection and financial allocations” needed to “actively rebuild our country better than before,” insisting it would not be used for repressive purposes. This is a complete lie.

With the JVP/NPP government already enforcing brutal austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund, Dissanayake's assurances were clearly directed at placating his critics in ruling circles and international investors.

As reported by the *Sunday Times* on November 30, the Meteorology Department had issued warnings as early as mid-November about atmospheric conditions that could develop into a major cyclone.

Athula Karunanayake, Sri Lanka's permanent

representative to the World Meteorological Organization, publicly raised alarms during the “Ada Derana Big Focus” program on November 12. Yet, according to the paper's political column, “There were no preparatory meetings, and no major public announcements were made until the full scale of the disaster became apparent, plunging the country into one of its worst natural calamities in years.”

In an interview with the *Sunday Island*, Dr. Thasun Amarasinghe, a scientist at the Climate Research Centre in Indonesia, stated: “There are no natural disasters. These are governance disasters. Sri Lanka destroyed the very systems that protected it. What's happening now is the predictable result of political mismanagement.” While accurate as far as they go, his remarks overlook the inadequate measures being taken by governments internationally to stem global warming, which directly contributed to Cyclone Ditwah's intensity.

While noting that cyclone victims openly blamed “unplanned development, wetland destruction, and political interference,” Amarasinghe omitted the role of colonial-era plantation projects. The deadly landslides in the central highlands are deeply rooted in decisions made under colonial rule. British imperialists cleared native forests to establish tea and rubber plantations without making any scientific assessment, replacing deep-rooted vegetation with shallow-rooted monocultures. Plantation infrastructure built on steep slopes left the hills highly vulnerable to erosion and collapse.

Today, torrential rains greatly magnify these structural weaknesses, turning once-profitable plantations into killing fields and contributing to the loss of hundreds of lives.



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