

Sri Lanka: Survivors of Cyclone Ditwah demand permanent housing, not temporary patchwork solutions

Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) reporters visited flood-affected areas in the Colombo District following Cyclone Ditwah. These areas include Kolonnawa, Kuruniyawatte, Meethotamulla, Wellampitiya, Orugodawatta, Modara and Madampitiya. Hundreds of survivors have been placed in temporary makeshift shelters with minimal facilities.

Kolonnawa, Orugodawatta, and Meethotamulla fall under the jurisdiction of the Kolonnawa Urban Council (KUC). According to a 2002 UNDP/UN-Habitat study, 70 percent of the KUC area lies below sea level. As a result, tens of thousands of impoverished residents face the threat of flooding year after year.

Survivors told WSWS reporters about the immediate hardships they and previous generations have endured during repeated floods. Most said they need proper, permanent housing, not just food. Having lost all their belongings, they are now struggling to rebuild their lives. They expressed deep resentment over decades of broken promises from successive governments to resolve their housing crisis.

On December 2, reporters visited St. John's College in Modara, which has been converted into a temporary shelter. More than 200 families from surrounding neighborhoods such as Madampitiya, Mattakkuliya, and Modara are staying there.

Sunethra, 47, said: "We came here on [November] 26th. The water rose up to my knees. Half of my house was destroyed." She added that the only solution is to "get a proper house."

Another woman commented that state officials "came and took down our names [pretending to offer housing] but then left without a trace. They haven't given them houses yet, and people are really suffering."

Residents took the reporters to their flooded neighborhood to show the dire conditions. The area was submerged in filthy water. Locals said the damage from this flood was worse than those in 1989, 1999 and 2016.

Sivaranjani asked, "Our parents were submerged in water. We, too, have gone under. Will our children suffer the same fate?"

Another woman, emotionally reflecting on the wider devastation throughout the island, said: "Sri Lanka has faced a tragedy. It's heartbreaking how many have suffered. Compared to others, we are somewhat safer." Her husband, accusing the government, added, "Reports say over 300 people are dead, and the people were not informed in advance."

Reporters then visited the temporary shelter at Terence Silva College in Kolonnawa, where about 100 families from Kolonnawa, Sinhapura, Lansiyawatte, and Kohilawatte are staying. One woman said, "The water reached my roof." Another added, "The refrigerator and TV are destroyed. You can't even see our rooftops." A third woman said, "Our children have nothing to wear. All their school bags are gone."

Many at the center spoke of hardships. There were not enough toilets, milk powder for children, or sanitary supplies for women.

On November 29, reporters visited additional areas: Kuruniyawatte in Orugodawatta, Meethotamulla, Kolonnawa and Wellampitiya.

A woman over 60, who has lived in Kuruniyawatta's First Lane for 25 years, said she had just begun to recover after losing everything in the 2016 floods. "I bought all this at great expense," she said, pointing to her possessions. "Now we're lost again, with nowhere

to go. My husband is also sick.” Noting that she lives by sewing clothes, she said, “My sewing machine was submerged and is beyond repair.” She now stays temporarily at a relative’s home.

She explained that no government assistance had been provided after the 2016 disaster, and she expressed disdain for all the official parties. “We’ve received nothing. They are all liars and useless. We don’t want aid—we want a good future for our children. People here have long demanded housing,” she said, but successive governments did nothing.

At the Vidyarthana Vidyalaya shelter in Kolonnawa, flood-affected families from Sinhapura shared similar stories.

Madusanka, a daily wage laborer, lives with his wife, two children and father. “The water rose to six feet in no time,” he said. “Some people stayed on rooftops. We couldn’t take any of our belongings. We brought only the clothes on our backs. We lost the children’s schoolbags, shoes. We couldn’t even take the clothes for our children to wear to school.”

He added, “Our homes were underwater in 2016, and we face floods at least once a year. Rain means we’re helpless again. We have nowhere to go, and we end up in makeshift shelters like this. This is something we are used to.”

Sampath, a young worker, said, “When I got home from work at ten o’clock at night [on the 28th], there was no water. Even if there was a little water, we knew we had to evacuate. By three in the morning [on the 29th], the house was completely submerged. Within two and a half to three hours, everything was filled. We saved the TV and the fridge—those are the only valuable things we have. We don’t have a big house. We keep our important documents [like birth certificates and identity cards], in a separate place in the house.” In an emergency, he added, they grab these documents and leave.

“When we are stranded like this,” Sampath added, “we are given some dry rations and food. That is not what we want—we need a permanent solution. We do not come to these places willingly. We come here because we have nowhere to go, because we are desperate, not to beg for food.”

Alluding to inequality and the rule of the capitalists, he said: “If you take a hundred people, ten will have everything. Ninety percent of society is controlled by

them.” He added that he has come to understand there are no solutions under this system of government. “It is good if you use technology to create a system to prevent us from flooding,” he said, while noting that they do not benefit from advanced technology.

“There are people who are more educated than us. We elected them to represent us, and they are supposed to find solutions,” he said, but added that he no longer believes his hopes will be fulfilled.

Reporters explained that decent housing and basic rights cannot be secured under capitalism, which prioritizes private profit over human need. They outlined the need for the working class to fight for a socialist program, which prioritizes human need over private profit.

Both Sampath and Madusanka said they had approached the Housing Development Authority, District Office, and Urban Council for help, but to no avail. They noted that nearby vacant apartment buildings are being kept off-limits to flood victims.

A woman who was with them said: “I’ve lived here [in Sinhapura] for 55 years. It floods every year. No one solves it.” She added that every government they voted for ignored their plight.

Mahamudeen, a resident of Meethotamulla in Kolonnawa, said: “Even a little rain floods this area. The housing problem needs to be solved. Everyone here intends to move if they get a house. This is a dirty, unlivable place.” He described conditions as unfit for human habitation.

He also pointed to the massive 2017 landslide caused by the Meethotamulla garbage dump, which killed at least 32 people and destroyed 142 houses. Afterward, the Urban Development Authority deemed homes in the area unsafe, yet no real housing solutions were provided.

Residents told the WSWs that despite promises to provide housing elsewhere, no initiative has been taken by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People’s Power (JVP/NPP) government since it came to power one year ago.



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