The human catastrophe caused by massive flooding in Sri Lanka and Asia: How did it happen?

Pani Wijesiriwardena
7 December 2025

Sri Lanka has suffered massive destruction from Cyclone Ditwah, which made landfall on November 26 in the southeastern part of the island and moved northward along the eastern coastline. According to official statistics, 627 people have died due to the cyclone and the resulting floods and landslides, while 190 remain missing.

More than 4,500 houses were completely destroyed and over 76,000 partially damaged. A total of 247 kilometres of roads were impacted, and 40 bridges have been washed away. Several sections of the main railway line running through the central highlands were ruined, leaving transportation along this critical route indefinitely suspended.

The devastation caused by the cyclone is not an isolated phenomenon limited to Sri Lanka. In the final week of November, torrential rains swept across Southeast Asia, triggering massive floods and landslides in Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia. More than a thousand people were killed, and millions were displaced. Tens of thousands of homes were either completely or partially destroyed. The full scale of property damage has yet to be assessed.

In response to the disaster, Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake declared this week, “We are facing the largest and most challenging natural disaster in our history.” While the scale of destruction is indeed immense, to claim that the catastrophe is purely a “natural” event conceals the deeper social and scientific realities underlying it.

Many people are asking a simple and urgent question: How did this catastrophe happen?

The answer lies not in fate or nature, but in the combined impact of climate change—driven primarily by global warming—and the systematic dismantling of scientific and disaster-prevention infrastructure by successive governments.

Decades of research have shown that global warming is reshaping weather patterns in the Indian Ocean by increasing sea-surface temperatures, intensifying cyclone formation, raising atmospheric moisture levels, producing extreme rainfall and raising the likelihood of “stalling” storms that unleash enormous volumes of water in a short time.

The unprecedented rainfall Sri Lanka experienced on November 28 was a clear manifestation of this climatic disruption. As reported in *The Diplomat*, “Sri Lanka received nearly 13 billion cubic meters of water in just 24 hours on November 28. This is equal to about 10 percent of Sri Lanka’s average annual rainfall. The discharge rate was about 150,000 cubic meters per second, close to the Amazon River at peak flow.”

Analyzing these figures, Professor Lakshman Galagedera, a hydrologist, explained: “Nearly all of this water turned to runoff because the soil had already been saturated due to previous rains. The result was floods and landslides that the country had never experienced before.”

Global warming, which is rapidly transforming climate patterns worldwide, cannot be controlled and reversed within the capitalist system, which is based on private profit. Last month’s COP-30 climate summit in Brazil provided yet another confirmation of this reality.

The summit was dominated by fossil-fuel interests, and major world leaders from the top greenhouse gas–emitting countries—including the US, China, Russia, Japan, and India—did not even attend. Governments and corporations have abandoned even the pretense of meeting the target of limiting the rise in global average temperature to 1.5°C since the pre-industrial era. New fossil-fuel extraction projects are being approved on a scale far beyond what the planet can tolerate.

Scientific reports now confirm that humanity is on track for a temperature rise of at least 2.6°C. This guarantees an era of catastrophic heatwaves, droughts, floods, disease outbreaks, food shortages and forced displacement—overwhelmingly impacting the world’s poorest populations. At the same time, pollution, deforestation, microplastics and toxic chemicals continue to a wider ecological breakdown.

This disaster is not the result of individual ignorance, but of the deliberate priorities of the global capitalist system, which places private profit and personal wealth above human life. Trillions of dollars are being invested in fossil fuels. Extreme inequality is maintained by billionaires. Military spending is soaring. The ruling class will not sacrifice its profits for climate safety. On the contrary, war and inter-imperialist conflict are

intensifying emissions and plundering resources. Sustainable technologies exist, but they cannot be implemented under a global system rooted in private ownership of production and nation-state rivalry.

Compounding the disaster was the failure to issue timely warnings or evacuate the public from high-risk areas prior to the rainfall.

One of the main reasons behind this failure was the lack of modern technology and adequate resources in the meteorological institutions of the affected countries.

Sri Lanka's Department of Meteorology (DOM), for example, operates with a barely functional radar network, inadequate radiosonde systems for gathering vertical atmospheric data, inadequate automatic weather stations across entire districts, no access to high-performance computing for forecasting models, and outdated satellite-reception equipment. This is no accident. It is the result of austerity budgets imposed by successive governments, including the current Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) administration.

In nearly every country affected, a primary cause of the landslides was the clearing of forest cover in hill regions for commercial purposes.

Similar conditions prevail in other countries. As a WSWS article published on December 4, 2025, explained, "Many forests have been cleared in Indonesia to make way for palm plantations for producing palm oil, one of the country's main exports. According to Global Forest Watch, North Sumatra alone lost 28 percent of its tree-covered area—1.6 million hectares—between 2001 and 2024."

Palitha Deshapriya, an irrigation engineer who has worked as a consultant on major infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka, explained to the WSWS that large reservoirs are built to withstand rare extreme rainfall events. But when hundreds of thousands of people are forced—out of sheer economic necessity—to live along floodplains, even properly functioning spillways become deadly.

"Even in the low-lying areas along the Kelani River," Deshapriya said, "which flows near Colombo, hundreds of thousands of people live in unsafe conditions. The vast majority of these people are too poor to afford land in safer locations." These communities are flooded regularly, and their primary demand is for safe housing that will not be submerged.

More than 40 bridges were destroyed by the floods in Sri Lanka. Deshapriya noted, "Bridges and embankments failed because they were built too short or too low, ignoring the maximum water throughput expected during spillway releases. This cost-cutting created choke points that magnified the force of the floodwaters, washing away roads and causing deaths."

Professor Sirimal Abeyratne of the University of Colombo emphasized that in Sri Lanka, due to low levels of industrialization and a poorly developed service sector, the majority of the population still lives in remote rural areas—many of which were among those devastated by the disaster.

"Unlike in developed countries, where populations have concentrated in urban areas, Sri Lanka's population growth has been spread thinly across the island," Professor Abeyratne said. "Census data from 2024 confirms that more than three-fourths of the population still live in rural areas."

Various intellectuals have proposed isolated "national solutions," as if climate change and disaster prevention can be addressed within a single country's borders. This is a dangerous illusion. No nationalist program can stabilize the climate, construct modern forecasting systems or build the infrastructure needed to protect lives without being part of a globally coordinated effort.

The WSWS has repeatedly emphasized that climate change is a global crisis that demands a global solution. It requires the mobilization of the international working class on the basis of a socialist program, including:

- Reorganizing global production to eliminate dependence on fossil fuels
- Redirecting scientific resources toward climate modeling, forecasting and adaptation
- Providing flood- and landslide-resistant housing as a social right
- Placing energy, transportation and industry under workers' democratic control
- Coordinating international scientific planning, not competitive national policies

Only an international socialist reorganization of society can marshal the technological, scientific and material resources required to address global warming and protect human life. This cannot happen under capitalism, which subordinates every aspect of society to private profit and fuels national and communal division. Only the international working class, which has no allegiance to national borders, can lead the struggle for socialism on a global scale.

The catastrophe now unfolding in Asia is a warning from a destabilized planet—a warning that the continued domination of capitalist profit over human life is incompatible with the survival of millions. The international working class must take up the fight to overthrow the capitalist system and build a socialist future.