

# Sri Lanka: Cyclone-affected plantation workers demand decent houses in safe places

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On December 6, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters visited the Talawakele area in Nuwara Eliya, Sri Lanka's central plantation district located more than 140 km from Colombo, to speak with plantation workers affected by Cyclone Ditwah.

Nuwara Eliya District is predominantly inhabited by Tamil-speaking tea plantation workers earning poverty-level wages. It is among the regions most affected by heavy rainfall, flooding, landslides and stone slides triggered by the cyclone. With 89 confirmed deaths, it ranks third after Kandy and Badulla. Another 37 people remain missing—the third highest figure after Kandy and Kegalle—and 63,121 people have been displaced into 211 temporary shelters, the second highest after Kandy District, according to the Disaster Management Centre (DMC).

Reporters visited Elgin Estate, 17 km from Talawakele, where 280 families have been displaced. One worker said: “We lived in a very dangerous area where landslides could occur at any moment. Now we have no intention of returning to our houses. We are demanding safe and decent housing for our families and a secure environment for our children's future.”

A female worker from the upper division of Elgin Estate stated: “Our houses are unfit for living. Eight years ago, even government land survey officers reported that our land was unsafe for habitation, but no one paid attention. Now, we are facing severe difficulties. Our children's education has been completely disrupted—there are no facilities for higher education here, and they must travel to schools in Talawakele or Kotagala. Transportation in our estate has nearly collapsed. We must walk five kilometers to catch a bus or pay 500 rupees for a three-wheeler. Above all, we are demanding decent and safe housing for our families.”

Another female worker, 38-year-old Louise Merry from Elgin Lower Division, said: “In 2019, a hydro-power station was built near our estate. During construction, they used explosives to break large rocks, which caused cracks in several areas of the mountain. We filed a case through a human rights organization, demanding a safe environment and proper housing. But the authorities completely ignored us.”

Amirtha Vasaha Merry, a 70-year-old retired worker, explained: “When our houses were flooded, we took shelter in the church located above our homes. The Grama Niladhari [village-level administrative official] came and told us not to return, warning that if we did, we'd be on our own. But later, he forced us to return and stopped providing food. Although the river has receded, we are still at risk of landslides, as the hills surrounding our homes remain unstable.”

She added that the gates of the Ambewela Reservoir Dam were opened on November 27 without any prior warning. “We could have saved our cattle and poultry,” if we'd been told in advance, she said.

Sahaya Merry, a 66-year-old retired worker, described the situation: “After three days, the Grama Niladhari of 476/L Division, Samali, told us to return home and come back to the church if the water rose again. But how can we know when the water is rising, especially when we're asleep? It appears suddenly, and we can't do anything. Neither the government nor the estate management seems to be taking this seriously.”

Anthonidas Sironmany, 46, a female worker, said: “Our house was flooded with river water, which destroyed valuable items, including the TV and other electronics. We can't afford to replace them on our daily wages, which barely cover food. We're required to meet a daily target of 18 kilograms of tea leaves—if we don't, our wages are cut. Our house is very close to

the river and it's extremely dangerous. We stayed at the church for three days, but now we've been told to return home. Although government officers and trade union leaders visited and promised help, we're back in the same situation."

Another worker, Rajeswary Rangan, said her house was completely destroyed by the flood. Currently, only 26 families identified by the government as the most affected are still staying in the church. "But all 280 displaced families are demanding relief, as well as land and proper housing," she added.

Many workers who spoke with WSWS reporters accused the government, estate companies and plantation trade unions of completely ignoring their plight. The government provided food for only the first three days. After that, workers had to rely on support from local residents, churches and other community organizations. No basic facilities were available—only limited toilets—and both children and the elderly were forced to sleep on the floor without mattresses or other essentials.

Displaced families from both the upper and lower divisions of Elgin Estate have been staying at shelters at Tangakelle Tamil School and Sahaya Matha Church since November 27. At one point, there were 930 people from 280 families.

Elgin Estate is now merged with Ouvahkella Estate and managed by Hatton Plantation PLC. It was previously part of Lippkella Estate. The estate is surrounded by hills and the Ambewela Reservoir Dam. The Elginoya, a branch of the Mahaweli River, flows near the workers' homes.

The road from Maraya Town to Elgin, Ouvahkella, and Tangakelle Estates has been severely damaged by flooding. Currently, buses run only as far as Maraya Town, forcing workers to walk over five kilometers to reach their homes.

Other towns in Nuwara Eliya District have also been severely impacted, including Ramboda, Kotmale, Ragala, Pudaluoya and Talawakele.

In Ramboda, three people were killed when a massive boulder fell onto their home near the Thawalanthena junction. The landslide caused extensive damage and destroyed part of the Kandy–Nuwara Eliya main road. Three villages—Grandi Ella, Rambodagama and Ampaththalawa—were washed away, with about 70 families swept into the Kotmale Reservoir Dam.

Thirteen bodies were recovered, and many remain missing. Transportation and electricity were cut off in the area for 11 days.

At High Forest Tea Estate in Ragala, a landslide killed 35 people. Eight bodies have been recovered, while 27 remain missing. Some homes were completely destroyed; others were partially damaged.

Eton Estate and Choisy Estate in Pudaluoya are currently under red alert for potential landslides. As a result, 105 people have been displaced and are seeking safety elsewhere. In Talawakele, 70 families at Oxford Estate were also displaced due to the same danger.

The longstanding negligence of successive governments and plantation companies is evident in the fact that most plantation workers still live in barrack-like line rooms—just 10 by 12 feet in size—constructed over a century ago during British colonial rule. These dwellings lack basic infrastructure, including healthcare and educational facilities.

Many of those affected told reporters they have yet to receive any meaningful assistance and have no confidence in the government, which continues to claim that the lives of cyclone victims will be "restored."



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