

“We were in a death trap”: Cyclone victims in central Sri Lanka speak out

Our reporters

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On December 10, *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) reporters visited the Sogama settlement, located in the Udapalatha Divisional Secretariat (DS) Division, near Gampola—a town in the central hill district of Kandy—to speak with survivors of the disaster caused by Cyclone Ditwah.

The Kandy District is the worst-affected region in the country, with 237 confirmed deaths and 73 reported missing as of December 15. It ranks third in terms of total affected, with 51,168 families and 173,686 individuals impacted, following the Colombo and Puttalam districts.

Gampola, 16 kilometers from Sogama, experienced heavy rainfall and severe flooding that submerged homes and roads in surrounding neighborhoods, rendering key access routes impassable. The Sogama settlement comprises eight villages—including Ihalagama, Hunukotugama, Udagama, Millagaspiya, Amuhena and Pallegama—and is home to about 500 families, totaling approximately 2,000 people.

Located in a mountainous area with unstable soil and scattered rock formations, the Sogama settlement is entirely unfit for human habitation. WSWS reporters observed that residents were living in constant danger, with their lives and livelihoods devastated—an assessment confirmed by villagers from Ihalagama.

According to these residents, nearly 500 displaced individuals from 97 families in Ihalagama and two neighboring villages are now sheltering at the Atabage Udagama Maha Vidyalaya (school) in Gampola.

W.G. Chandrapala, 63, a daily wage laborer, said: “There were three families in our house—mine, my daughter’s, and my son’s. There were nine of us. After midnight [on the 28th], the flood came to the village. We somehow escaped with our lives, but all our belongings and household goods were destroyed. Now

I’m stuck here. Even if I eat something to satisfy my hunger, my stomach burns. I have lost everything. I’m surviving with the help of people around me.”

He added, denouncing the government’s indifference: “No one from the government has come here to see what has happened to us. Is this how they care for our lives?”

J.V. Sudheera Anura Bandara, 38, a father of two, said: “Our house was destroyed. I left everything behind to save my kids and my wife. Even when it rained, I was scared—we knew we were in a death trap. But we had no choice. There is never any relief for poor people like us.”

He also criticized the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People’s Power (JVP/NPP) government: “They claimed this government was for poor people like us, but it is not that. They [the government officials] say they’ll give us money, but we never receive anything. The only help came from our neighbors, who are suffering just like us. No government represents us. They come during elections and make promises. We’re always deceived—that’s all.”

Sudheera’s wife, Jeewani Kumudu Kumari, 39, recalled the night of the disaster, around 8 p.m., as she was preparing food for her children, aged 16 and 3. “Suddenly, a large stream of water came in through the window. My husband shouted for me to grab the kids and get out quickly. He rushed in to rescue us, and we went to a nearby house and stayed there for the night.”

Describing the devastation, she said: “When I went back and the next morning, I saw that trees had fallen onto our house. All the walls were broken; the roof was gone. Water had filled the house, and everything was soaked in mud. Everything we had accumulated through hard work and struggle over the years had been

destroyed.”

“We just want a place to live,” she added. “That’s all we’re asking for.”

WSWS reporters explained the Socialist Equality Party’s (SEP) program, emphasizing that such disasters are not simply natural events but the result of capitalist-driven environmental destruction and global warming.

Sudheera thanked the reporters and accompanied them to other parts of the settlement.

The reporters witnessed the dangerous conditions in which the people of Sogama live. The area lies on the slopes of the Central Highlands, where heavy rainfall can trigger deadly landslides. Most residents rely on dairy farming, vegetable cultivation and daily wage labor. They told the WSWS that no government has ever supported them. Many expressed the belief that, despite everything, they would rather face death than leave behind what they had built through years of hard work.

Dharmapriya Nandasiri, 54, spoke from his veranda, pointing to his cattle shed that had sunk by nearly a meter. “No one cares about us. We didn’t expect help. We live off the milk from these animals.”

Describing the threat of landslides, he said: “They say this entire mountain is going to collapse. But how can we just leave, no matter what warnings they issue?” He explained that they could not abandon their belongings or livestock.

“My daughter is studying at the University of Ruhuna [in the southern province]. We live because of these animals; they provide us with an income, including for our other children’s education.”

“No one responsible from the government has come to this area. They say this is a government for the poor—that’s a blatant lie. Only the Grama Niladhari [village-level administrative official], the veterinary officer and officials from the NBRO [National Building Research Organization] have come here. Those who talk about aid, who claim they sympathize with us, who promise thousands or millions—none of them have come to see the situation we’re in.

“We eat and drink only with help from our own people. Still, I’m glad that you came to see our situation,” Nandasiri said, thanking the reporters while angrily denouncing the government.

About 10 to 15 people took part in the discussion, listening attentively and participating with interest. The

reporters explained the scientific causes of the disaster and the necessity of a socialist program as the only way to put an end to such catastrophes. The participants expressed their agreement and provided contact details for further discussion.

Udawalapala (which includes Gampola and Sogama) was placed under a Level 2 (Amber) alert for moderate landslide risk on October 20, according to a *NewsWire* article titled “NBRO issues landslide early warnings for 10 districts,” effective from 8:30 p.m. on October 20 to 8:30 p.m. on October 21. This underscores how hazardous the area has long been.

The most recent NBRO landslide warning, which includes 85 Divisional Secretariat (DS) divisions, also lists Udawalapala among the areas at risk.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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