

2 months after Cyclone Ditwah: Sri Lanka's humanitarian catastrophe continues

Wasantha Rupasinghe
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Cyclone Ditwah struck Sri Lanka on November 27–28, 2025, unleashing the country's worst natural disaster since the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Two months into the catastrophe, the government has failed to adequately address the scale of the devastation. Millions are facing deepening poverty, while workers and displaced families stage protests demanding safe housing and genuine reconstruction.

The figures reveal the true magnitude of the disaster. The official death toll stands at 649, with 173 still missing. Approximately 2.3 million people—nearly 10 percent of Sri Lanka's population—have been directly exposed to flooding.

The World Bank estimates direct physical damage at \$US4.1 billion, equivalent to 4 percent of GDP, with total economic losses estimated at between \$6 and \$7 billion. The cyclone inundated 1.1 million hectares and damaged 720,000 buildings—6,000 homes have been completely destroyed and over 108,000 partially damaged.

The city of Kandy recorded the highest death toll, with 243 confirmed deaths and 69 missing. In Nuwara Eliya, home to Tamil-speaking plantation workers, there were 81 deaths and 32 people still missing.

The devastation exposes the total failure of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government's response and its chronic lack of disaster preparedness.

Meteorologists issued warnings nearly two weeks in advance, forecasting 200 to 300 millimetres of rainfall, with some models predicting up to 500 millimetres. Despite these warnings, authorities failed to issue timely multilingual SMS alerts, evacuate high-risk communities, mobilise local administrations, or pre-position rescue teams.

This criminal negligence was compounded by decades of environmental mismanagement, unregulated hillside construction, deforestation, and reckless land-use policies that transformed a foreseeable natural event into a social catastrophe.

More than two months after the cyclone, 170,000 people remain displaced or living with host families. As of January 23, 6,680 individuals were accommodated in 85 designated relief centres—temporary shelters in schools, religious sites, and community buildings never meant to house people for extended

periods.

The government's strategy of encouraging displaced families to secure rental housing has effectively privatised recovery, pushing vulnerable families deeper into debt. Safety centres face significant protection issues, including inadequate privacy, poor lighting, and insufficient space segregation, elevating the risk of violence, particularly for women and girls.

In high-risk areas, families are still threatened by ongoing landslides. In Nuwara Eliya District, residents have now been placed on alert if rainfall reaches 100 mm and instructed to evacuate immediately if it reaches 150 mm.

When the cyclone struck, the JVP/NPP government announced a Rs.72.2 billion (\$US232 million) relief package. President Dissanayake promised Rs.25,000 (\$US80) to each affected family for house cleaning and Rs.50,000 for essential household items.

Government officials claimed late last month that 70 percent of the Rs. 50,000 allowance and 97 percent of the house-cleaning grant had been distributed to over 109,000 families.

The official narrative, however, conceals grim realities on the ground. The situation at the Stockholm Estate in Norwood, Nuwara Eliya, exposes the actual situation. The estate's line-rooms or barrack-style dwellings housing 65 families were severely damaged. On December 17, around 700 workers held a protest at the estate demanding land to build decent homes in safe locations.

The cyclone devastated many plantation workers. Nearly 50 plantation workers were killed in landslides and floods across Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Badulla, Matale, Kegalle, and Kurunegala. Hundreds of houses were destroyed and thousands damaged, pushing already impoverished workers back toward destitution.

Speaking with *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) reporters visiting Stockholm Estate, residents accused the authorities of sending them back to homes that are now, quite literally, death traps. Residents said they have received no government assistance—not even the meagre Rs. 25,000 allocated for so-called “house cleaning.”

While limited aid was provided by a few NGOs and voluntary organisations in the immediate aftermath of Cyclone Ditwah, that support has since dried up. “Now no one is looking at us,”

victims said.

A similar situation prevails at the Gawarawila Estate in Maskeliya, where about 30 people from nine plantation families reported the same neglect and desperation, stating that they have been left entirely to their fate.

The Centre for Policy Alternatives has revealed that communities in Bramley Estate and other areas received no assistance whatsoever for over 40 days after the cyclone.

In Puttalam District, administrative officers faced extreme pressure, with some threatened by angry residents. While more than 3,000 appeals were filed for the Rs. 25,000 cleaning grant, officers have been able to inspect only about 50 houses per day. One-third of the district's government officials were themselves impacted by the cyclone, forced to work in borrowed clothing.

Immediately after the disaster, the government—anticipating mass opposition to its inadequate preparations and response—imposed draconian emergency powers. A senior minister openly urged police to use emergency regulations to suppress dissent. Multiple statements, including from Grama Niladharis (village officers), told the media that relief distribution is being politicised, with aid channelled to consolidate support in selected areas while Tamil communities in the North and East are neglected.

The worsening social catastrophe has generated immense anger. On January 5, approximately 200 workers from the Concordia and Eskdale estates in Kandapola held a protest march, declaring that they would not leave temporary shelters until they were provided with safe accommodation. Workers called for an end to the “slave line-room system,” noting that their line-rooms remain death traps with severe structural cracks. While the government has announced a land-donation scheme for permanent housing, bureaucratic delays continue to choke relief distribution and delay alternative accommodation.

Last month's assessment by the UN Development Program confirmed that Cyclone Ditwah is pushing many Sri Lankans into poverty. Based on interviews with 510 local officials and community representatives across 85 divisional secretariat divisions in the 22 most affected districts, its report found that 93 percent said their livelihoods had suffered due to crop and livestock losses, job losses, and business closures.

Seventy-six percent of those surveyed regarded government aid as a coping strategy, while 40 percent were relying on borrowing from money lenders—a pathway to crippling debt. The report specifically noted that disaster victims are “increasingly selling their personal assets, including livestock, jewellery, and vehicles, and relying on subsistence activities to survive.”

The UN has allocated just \$4.5 million from its Central Emergency Response Fund and in December launched a Humanitarian Priorities Plan seeking \$35.3 million to support 658,000 of the most vulnerable Sri Lankans. The World Bank contributed \$120 million from existing projects, but this

amount must be stretched across healthcare, water, education, agriculture, transport, and communications in the affected districts. For a country already mired in deep economic crisis, these sums are shamefully inadequate.

The UNDP warned that Sri Lanka “cannot shoulder more debt for rebuilding,” cautioning that additional borrowing risks pushing the nation “off the debt cliff.” With 85 percent of government revenue already committed to debt servicing in 2026, the government will be unable to allocate the desperately needed funds for genuine reconstruction.

Two months after Cyclone Ditwah, the contours of Sri Lanka's humanitarian crisis are unmistakably clear. The JVP/NPP government's relief program, while offering symbolic gestures, has failed to deliver genuine reconstruction or address the underlying vulnerabilities the cyclone has exposed.

Plantation workers' protests demanding safe housing and land rights must be expanded beyond the affected estates. Their fight for decent housing, secure land tenure, and dignified working conditions must become part of a broader mobilisation of the working class fighting for the reconstruction of devastated communities and against government and employer attacks on jobs, wages, and working conditions.

The slow and grossly inadequate international aid response underscores the reality that capitalist governments everywhere will never provide genuine solutions to the worsening natural disasters impacting the masses around the world, particularly in underdeveloped countries.

The fight to overcome the social devastation created by Cyclone Ditwah and years of government neglect can only be advanced through the independent mobilisation of the working class and rural masses. This requires the formation of action committees at the community and workplace level, as part of the struggle for a workers' and farmers' government committed to genuine reconstruction and based a socialist program.

As fresh rains continue to threaten further flooding and landslides, time is running out for affected communities. The humanitarian crisis will only deepen unless the current trajectory of inadequate aid, bureaucratic obstruction, and the IMF-imposed program of austerity is fundamentally challenged and reversed.



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