

# Sri Lanka: Residents in Colombo housing complex protest dilapidated conditions

**Our reporters**  
**18 June 2026**

Residents of the Sahapura housing complex at Boralla, Colombo, in Sri Lanka, staged a protest on the morning of June 3, demanding the immediate repair of elevators that have been out of service for an extended period.

Gathering in an open area adjacent to the complex, they displayed placards bearing slogans such as, “Fulfil the demands of all Sahapura residents!” “Repair the lifts immediately!” “Are the officials asleep?” and “People suffer because the elevators are not working.”

The demonstration reflected growing frustration among residents over the authorities’ prolonged failure to address a problem that has severely disrupted the daily lives of hundreds of working-class and urban poor families living in the high-rise housing complex. It is not an isolated issue. People have been angry for years and months over the failure to repair their houses.

Although the 14-storey complex contains 671 units housing more than 20,000 residents, only one of its six elevators is currently operational. Elderly residents, people with medical issues and schoolchildren have been forced to climb multiple floors, sometimes all 14 storeys, on foot. Residents protested after repeated appeals to the authorities were ignored.

Like successive governments, the current Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People’s Power (JVP/NPP) government has broken the promises it made to residents at election time.

Officials from the government’s Urban Development Authority (UDA), who arrived at the protest site, urged residents to end the demonstration, claiming that all funds required for repairs had already been approved. However, when *World Socialist Web Site* reporters went to the area for the second time on Tuesday evening, people were still impatiently waiting in front of the only working lift.

Ignoring attempts by officers from the Borella Police Station to obstruct them, the protesters marched along Pitiduwe Siridhamma Mawatha to Baseline Road, where they staged a sit-in protest and chanted slogans.

A housewife who has lived in the Sahapura complex for

nearly 25 years told the WSWs that the elevator problem was only one aspect of numerous issues that have existed for years.

“From the day this government came to power, we asked it to solve the issue, but nothing has been done. We cannot maintain these apartment buildings ourselves. If they were properly maintained and the elevators repaired, there would be no problem,” she said.

She explained that while some residents paint their units because the walls have become discoloured and dilapidated, most cannot afford the expense.

“Broken pipes prevent water from draining properly from bathrooms and kitchens. There used to be a garbage disposal chute, but it no longer functions. Now we keep our rubbish in bags, and a private company collects them. We have to pay them 300 rupees per month,” she added.

Garbage could be seen piled up near stairways, creating unsanitary conditions. Sections of the wastewater drainage system on the upper floors had completely broken down. In some places, residents had wrapped damaged sections with polythene sheets, while surrounding areas were permanently wet with wastewater. Residents insist that the government must provide regular and adequate funding for maintenance and ensure proper supervision of the complex.

Sahapura was the first high-rise housing project built for low-income people in Colombo, launched by the President Chandrika Kumaratunga government under the banner of providing better housing for shanty dwellers. As the WSWs explained at the time, the project’s real purpose was not to solve the housing crisis but to free up valuable real estate occupied by poor residents for industrial and commercial development.

Constructed in 2001–2002 under the World Bank-backed Sustainable Townships Programme, Sahapura was managed by Real Estate Exchange Ltd. (REEL). Company documents openly stated the government’s objective: “To attract foreign direct investment, it is essential to provide cheap labour and suitable land areas and infrastructure, particularly within the city of Colombo.”

The housing units were not intended to provide decent living conditions. The units range from 335 to 600 square feet and were allocated according to the size of residents' former houses. The bathrooms measure only one metre by one metre, and there are no proper kitchens. Instead, there is only a concrete slab for placing a gas stove and other items. In effect, the former shanty dwellers were moved from "horizontal slums" to what can only be described as "vertical slums."

Far from providing safe housing, many apartment complexes have become death traps due to poor planning, inadequate maintenance, and the absence of basic safety measures. In February this year, a seven-year-old boy was killed at the Helamuthu Sevana housing complex in Mutuwal after a section of the cement ceiling from the building's seventh floor suddenly collapsed on him. In November 2024, a fire caused by an electrical leak in an elevator damaged the Laksanda Sevana apartment complex in Kolonnawa, disrupting residents' lives and destroying property. The incident triggered protests by residents, who accused authorities of neglecting essential maintenance and safety requirements.

The re-housing program was continued by the 2005–2015 Mahinda Rajapakse government as part of a World Bank-backed initiative to transform Colombo into "a leading South Asian commercial hub," and was later expanded through the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government's Megapolis project. Under the guise of "development," successive governments forcibly evicted tens of thousands of poor residents from valuable urban land and relocated them into high-rise housing schemes.

According to a report, of the 280 hectares previously occupied by slum dwellers in Colombo, only 120 hectares were planned to be redeveloped for housing; the remaining 160 hectares were to be sold for commercial development.

According to the Colombo Settlement Survey, the number of "underserved settlements" (shanty settlements) decreased from 1,735 in 2012 to 1,360 in 2023. The report says that "This could be attributed to the involuntary relocation of individuals living in settlements to UDA-built high-rises since 2010." There are still 55,866 housing units in the settlements, with around 87,119 families, or more than 300,000 residents.

While many people now live in "vertical slums," hundreds of luxury condominiums and major tourist hotels were built on the land from which they had been forcibly removed.

According to the recently published Sri Lanka Real Estate Market Outlook 2026 by LankaPropertyWeb, the average monthly net salary of a worker in Colombo is 70,452 rupees (\$US210), while the selling price of one square foot of luxury apartment space in the city centre is 108,442 rupees

(\$US324).

On June 4, Deputy Minister of Urban Development Eranga Gunasekara held a media conference and blamed previous governments for conditions at Sahaspura. He declared that the apartment complexes had been built "not for humans but for animals" and had become "hellholes."

Under the current government of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, the so-called Colombo Regeneration Project continues, with plans to construct 2,000 housing units for "dwellers living in underserved settlements." The purpose is the same: to release real estate for corporations and confine the poor to poorly built complexes.

Gunasekara's rhetoric was intended to hoodwink people. His JVP/NPP government is continuing to impose austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and placing the burden of the economic crisis, intensified by the US war on Iran, on working people, throwing many more into poverty. Public health, education and housing programs are all being starved.

More than six months after the devastating Cyclone Ditwah, thousands of families are still living in temporary shelters. According to UNICEF, the "National Disaster Relief Services Center (NDRSC) reports that by the end of May 2026, approximately 1,337 people remain displaced in 18 safety centres." As of mid-April, 150,329 displaced persons were still being housed by family members or in other accommodation outside formal shelters.

The bitter experiences of workers and oppressed people demonstrate that the housing crisis, like all other social problems, cannot be solved through appeals to capitalist governments or within the capitalist system. Poor residents must build independent action committees and link up with the working class to fight for a workers' and peasants' government that will implement socialist policies to secure their social rights.



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