

Sri Lankan government abandons cyclone-affected tea plantation workers

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More than seven months after Cyclone Ditwah struck Sri Lanka on November 28, 2025, thousands of families remain in dire conditions. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government's much-touted compensation program has done little to resolve the hardships faced by victims.

Cyclone Ditwah devastated much of the country. According to official data, the death toll stands at 649 and 173 people remain missing. About 2.3 million people—nearly 10 percent of Sri Lanka's population—were directly affected by flooding. The World Bank estimated direct physical damage at \$US4.1 billion—equivalent to 4 percent of Sri Lanka's GDP—with total economic losses projected at between \$6 billion and \$7 billion.

Soon after the disaster, President Anura Kumara Dissanayake announced compensation, promising up to 5 million rupees (\$US16,300) for fully destroyed homes, 500,000 rupees for partial damage and compensation for deaths and livelihood grants. He announced a record 500 billion rupee disaster relief allocation, the largest in the country's history.

An article in the *Daily Mirror* on July 3, however, titled "Dismay for Ditwah victims," reported that although 97 percent of people received initial payments of 25,000 rupees and 50,000 rupees for cleaning and fixing damaged property and equipment, "thousands of affected individuals remain on waiting lists to receive compensation for both partially damaged and fully destroyed houses."

Plantation estate workers are among the worst affected. According to Plantation and Community Infrastructure Minister Samantha Vidyarathna, 10,310 estate families were impacted by the cyclone in several districts, including Badulla and Nuwara Eliya. While 431 line rooms were completely destroyed, 2,152 were partially damaged.

For these workers, who are among the most oppressed in Sri Lanka and endure slave-labour conditions, Ditwah meant falling from the frying pan into the fire. Hundreds, if not thousands, are unable to return to their line rooms—cramped and overcrowded housing units on the plantations—because the cyclone turned them into death traps.

The government provided these workers with only three months' rent (75,000 rupees). Many plantation workers moved to rented houses far from the tea plantations where they had

originally been employed, lost their jobs and were unable to find new work. Others were forced to return to unsafe, storm-damaged line rooms.

More than six months after the cyclone, the government was still discussing whether the estate workers should receive any housing compensation. In an attempt to placate rising anger, Minister Vidyarathna told Parliament on June 9 that Cabinet had decided estate residents would be eligible for 5 million rupees and a 10-perch plot of land even if they did not own their line rooms or the land where they work. One month later, however, nothing has been done.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) recently visited the Eskdale Division of Park Estate, Kandapola, in Nuwara Eliya District, which is managed by Udupussellawa Plantations, a subsidiary of Browns company.

All 280 families in Eskdale Estate remain at risk if another cyclone or climate-related disaster occurs. Water supplies and roads were severely damaged by the cyclone and the estate school remains closed. While 135 families' houses were partially damaged, 20 houses were completely destroyed. Six people died on the estate. The estate management says land was allocated to 62 workers in the Park Division, but no one has actually received it.

V. Prakalathan, 53, a father of three, told the WSWS that his family lost everything when their house was destroyed.

"Our two children barely escaped with their lives. We informed the relevant government authorities immediately, but despite promises, we have received neither a house nor land. Management has also ignored our situation, leaving us no choice but to live in my brother's cowshed," he said.

Prakalathan had worked as a security guard for 14 years at a private company but lost his job after taking extended leave to visit the Divisional Secretariat (DS) to complete the required paperwork for compensation.

"The DS officials promised us 15,000 rupees a month to rent a house. We rented one for six months but received payments for only three months. Unable to continue paying rent, we had to return to the estate. The place where we now live is unsafe," he said.

His wife, S. Parimaladevi, said she had worked for a decade in the estate's tea-processing factory, where her husband had

also been employed briefly. Low wages made it impossible to support their family, educate their children, or build a proper home.

“I worked in Saudi Arabia for 15 years and saved enough to build a four-room house with a kitchen and buy household appliances. Everything was destroyed in the flood. We lost nearly 4 million rupees but have not received any compensation. The estate management even refused to provide us with a line room,” she said.

Another worker said that during the cyclone the roads were completely damaged and people could not enter the estate. In that situation, estate management concealed the true extent of the damage from government authorities. “The management report said only 15 houses had been damaged, but 62 houses were damaged. It was corrected only after workers’ protests.”

The worker said the three trade unions—the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), National Union of Workers (NUW) and Up-Country Peoples’ Front (UPF)—were not defending workers’ rights and instead supported management.

“They only care about getting workers’ votes during elections. One of the CWC leaders, Yogarajah, is from our estate. He is the Nuwara Eliya Pradeshiya Sabha chairman and has a large vegetable garden on this estate. MGSK Pathmasiri, who is a Nuwara Eliya Pradeshiya Sabha member, is also from our estate and belongs to the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP). They organised a protest in front of the President’s Office in Colombo, but nothing has changed—workers are suffering a lot.”

The fake left FSP, while criticising the government, sows illusions among workers that they can get relief and concessions by appealing to the government.

Retired worker Thiruchelvam said: “They say the estate school will reopen only when there are 72 students. Before the cyclone there were 68 students. Since there is no school here, parents are forced to send small children to schools 6 to 7 kilometres away in Kandapola and Ragala. The government, estate management, and trade unions haven’t paid any attention to this issue.”

G. Suvendra, a 38-year-old casual female worker, said her daily income was insufficient to meet family expenses. “I am paid only 60 rupees for plucking a kilo of tea leaves, so my daily wage is less than 1,000 rupees. It is not enough. We face many difficulties in sending children to school and surviving,” she added.

Gloria said that after being displaced on November 27, her family stayed for four months at Siththi Vinayagar Temple in Kandapola with nearly 800 people. For the past three months they have lived in a rented house in Kandapola. The government-promised rent was credited to their account on the day the president visited Nuwara Eliya. “The government did not give us the promised concessions, we have no trust in the government,” she said.

Another female worker angrily explained: “Our homes were

damaged. The water supply has completely collapsed. It is very difficult to walk on the damaged roads carrying loads of tea leaves. Management forces us to pluck 22 kilos of tea leaves per day to receive the full wage of 1,750 rupees; otherwise, the wage is reduced or counted as only half a day’s pay. All the trade unions are useless; they are not fighting for workers’ rights.”

The government’s callous attitude was revealed in a discussion in Parliament on June 9 about the cyclone’s impact on schools in Central, Uva and Sabaragamuwa provinces. Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya admitted that some students who had been assigned to alternative schools had not reported for classes and called for urgent follow-up to identify these children. Six months after the cyclone, she said there was still a need for reliable data and temporary schools.

This is happening even though the government collected 10 billion rupees for the “Rebuilding Sri Lanka Fund” declared by President Dissanayake, from local and international donors. Anil Jayantha Fernando, the deputy minister of finance and labour minister, declared on June 6 that “the fund was established to help the country recover from the devastating impacts of Cyclone Ditwah,” as part of the 500 billion rupees recovery plan. He did not explain why people were still languishing in temporary shelters.

The president appointed top corporate bosses to manage the fund, including Mohan Pandithage, chair of Hayleys Group; Krishan Balendra, chief executive of John Keells Holdings; Dr. Parakrama Dissanayake, deputy chair of Aitken Spence; Ashroff Omar, CEO of Brandix; Ishara Nanayakkara, executive chairman of LOLC Holdings; as well as top state officials. The fund’s chair is Minister Fernando.

The make-up of this committee points to the government’s priority: to defend the interests of big business. Its focus is not on providing relief for cyclone victims, the majority of whom are workers and the rural poor, but on escalating the implementation of IMF-dictated austerity measures and pro-business restructuring.



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