

The Great Flood

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Cyclone Ditwah ripped through Sri Lanka between 27 and 29 November. The toll is devastating. Seven days later, the official count is 486 deaths and 341 missing. To which should be added five navy and one air-force officer killed in rescue operations; and an electricity board technician electrocuted while repairing a power line. As search teams reach previously inaccessible areas this week, the fatality count has grown exponentially, and some fear it will climb into four digits. We may never know the true number.

Hundreds of thousands are sheltering in state, community, and private facilities, as well as with family and friends. More than 41,000 homes have been fully or partially destroyed. As many as 108 roads are currently impassable; 247 km of road are damaged; 40 bridges are destroyed, isolating homes and hamlets, and hampering rescue and relief efforts. Electricity, water supply, internet, telephone, and transport services have been disrupted in all 25 districts. Over 1.5 million people across communities, faiths, genders, generations, and regions, otherwise distant from each other, are commonly even if not similarly in distress. President Anura Kumara Disnayake, acceding to parliamentary opposition demands, declared an island-wide state of emergency on 29 November.

This is Sri Lanka's worst natural catastrophe since the Indian Ocean tsunami of 26 December 2004, when some 35,000 lives were lost in the space of minutes. This time, comments Vinya Ariyaratne of Sarvodaya: "The whole country is a disaster zone, except for a few places ... [whereas] the tsunami [struck] only coastal areas" (cited in Nierenberg *et al.* 2025).

It has been a *mensis horribilis* in Southeast Asia too, where the peoples of the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Malaysia have been battered by several tropical storms. Over 900 people are known to have died across the region, and this is an underestimate. In the south of Thailand, 3 million people are affected; as are 1.5 million in western Indonesia (especially Sumatra). The stories are the same. Survivors marooned with nothing to eat or drink and waiting to

be rescued. Families searching for the missing. Hospitals unable to care for the sick for want of electricity, clean water, cooked food, and medical supplies. Roads and bridges washed away. Telecommunication services down. Homes, assets, and livelihoods washed away. Everywhere, the poor bear the brunt; punished time and again, for being poor.

Sleepwalking into disaster

Did we sleepwalk into this disaster? From 21 November onwards heavy rain, strong winds, and lightning strikes were experienced in several districts of Sri Lanka. By the following day, the Meteorology Department forecast over 100 mm of rainfall within 24 hours in the Sabaragamuwa, Southern and Western provinces; while the Irrigation Department warned of flooding in the upper reaches of the Gin Ganga and Nilwala river basins and potential flooding in low-lying areas of the Deduru and Attanagalu river basins. Days earlier some students in Galle and Matara districts sitting for the advanced-level (AL) examination had to be transported by boat, and with military assistance, to reach their centres.

Landslide warnings were issued by the National Building Research Organisation (NBRO) initially for Badulla, Colombo, Kalutara, Kandy, Kegalle, Kurunegala, Nuwara Eliya and Ratnapura districts; and subsequently extended to Galle, Matara, and Hambantota. The Disaster Management Centre (DMC) cautioned that slopes along the central highlands had become destabilised, increasing the risk of earth slips, rockfalls, and roads being blocked by debris.

On the same day (21 November), triggered by the heavy rain, a house and adjacent shop in Kadugannawa along the major Colombo-Kandy Road were buried, trapping 10 people, six of whom were killed. By 24 November, the Meteorological Department forecast a low-pressure system developing the following day. It warned of strong winds and lightning with showers or thunderstorms exceeding 100 mm in the north and east. Fishers and naval personnel were informed not to go to sea until further notice.

So far, so familiar. This litany of occurrences, associated with the north-east monsoon season, have become commonplace, numbing shock and shame. In fact, the first trial for the National People's Power (NPP) government soon after its election was the floods of late November 2024.

Around the same time last year, a deep depression in the Bay of Bengal intensified into a tropical system named Cyclone Fengal, mainly affecting the eastern, northern, and northeastern coastal regions. Over 200 mm of rain accompanied by winds of 60 km/h flooded homes, towns and villages, and fields (IFRC 2025). Seventeen people died and nearly 470,000 people were affected.

Water submerged 338,000 acres of rice paddy, fully destroying 10,035 acres; and tens of thousands of acres of vegetable and maize crops. Ninety-nine houses were destroyed and 2,082 partially damaged. Fishers lost their daily-waged livelihood for the period they could not put out to sea, while some boats and gear were damaged adding to their financial burden. Vegetable and rice retail rates surged, representing both supply shortages and price-gouging. Compounded by shortages of coconut and salt, there was public anxiety over food availability and prices in the new year.

Opposition politicians roundly criticised the NPP for acting slowly in anticipating and preparing for the storm, and in delivering assistance to the affected; censuring them with inexperience in management, and hubris in their astonishing general election mandate.

Here we are again

One year later, here we are again, except more horrific. What is happening? As ocean water becomes warmer—through climate change fuelled by greenhouse gas emissions, inseparable from the Capitalocene (Moore 2017)—storms become more intense. The volume of rainfall increases as does the speed of wind, worsening the impact and damage of floods. The science is that as ocean temperatures rise above 26C, warm and moisture-heavy air from the ocean surface evaporates to form clouds and create a low-pressure zone, providing enough energy for winds to spin reaching 63km/h (Poynting 2025; Shamim 2025).

The evidence from a hotter planet is that storms now unleash higher wind speeds and greater rainfall, while moving slower across land—all of which escalates their destructive effects. As climate scientist Roxy Koll explains,

... storms this season have been carrying extraordinary amounts of moisture. A warmer ocean and atmosphere are loading these systems with water, so even moderate cyclones now unleash rainfall that overwhelms rivers, destabilises slopes and triggers cascading disasters. Landslides and flash floods then strike the most vulnerable, the communities living along these fragile environments. (cited in Niranjana 2025)

On Wednesday, 26 November, rain resumed across the island accompanied by strong howling winds. But we had no inkling of what was to come. Heralding the imminent landfall of Cyclone Ditwah on Friday the 28th, the grey foreboding sky opened with greater ferocity the day before. It poured mercilessly on Thursday 27th and Friday 28th, making for 72 hours of relentlessly pelting rain. A foot of water or 300 mm fell on average on both days, with 540 mm recorded in the hill country district of Matala. Wind speeds of 65 km/h and up to 80 km/h brought down trees or their branches, and directed water onto roads, railway tracks, and dwellings.

The already saturated soil in hilly and mountainous areas of the central massif could not stick together. Rivers of mud formed and swelled, beginning their terrifying descent to the lower slopes below, where homes, businesses, villages, and small towns hug mountainsides. The roads cut into the hills crumbled. Bridges snapped. The avalanches uprooted electricity and telephone poles, inundating built structures and their inhabitants. In low level areas near rivers, canals and other water bodies, streets and neighbourhoods were submerged by flood water, turning into muddy lakes only accessible by boat and helicopter. Their residents were stranded for many hours and sometimes days. Some were trapped on a higher storey or rooftop, without light, drinking water, and cooking facilities, as their mobile telephone batteries began dying, cutting them off from the outside world, even as flood levels kept rising around them.

The areas where people have been most affected by number of dead and displaced are the up-country tea plantation districts especially Badulla, Kandy and Nuwara Eliya; the fishing and farming districts of Puttalam, Mannar and Trincomalee; and the densely populated industrial and services economy districts of Colombo and Gampaha.

What we know from disasters past, for those who wish to see, is that they hold up a mirror to the class and social fractures otherwise papered over or made unseen by the rich and powerful. Those who are hit first and hardest; those who are the last to receive help; those

who get forgotten when the relief shelters close and the donation drives dry, are from the basement of society. In our ongoing disaster too, they are the marginal farmers or rural labourers; the plantation residents or workers; the landless who live in informal settlements along river and reservoir banks, canals and storm drains and alongside railway tracks; the urban daily-waged and home-based workers; the internal migrants such as free trade zone workers; the persons with disabilities; the elderly; and the queer and trans people.

State and public response

Once the severity of the storm and its consequences became clear on 27 November, state officials and the security forces swung into search and rescue actions, joined later by naval, air-force personnel from India and Pakistan. The scale of the damage and the massive number of people to be cared for, is clearly overwhelming. Public sector workers, so readily denigrated by the middle-class commentariat and right-wing think tanks as a drain on taxpayers, were as always, the first responders in an emergency. They worked for days and nights at a stretch in appalling conditions, often at risk to their own lives. The workers of the Road Development Authority and local government authorities such as the Colombo Municipal Council braved the elements to clear fallen trees and other debris from roads and homes; the workers of the Ceylon Electricity Board climbed posts and repaired connections in dangerous wind conditions to restore power supplies and telecommunication transmission towers where possible. Ambulance staff and health workers turned up for duty, including at mobile health camps for the sick and injured.

State administrative officials at divisional and district level scrambled to identify shelters for the displaced and for food and other materials. However, the opposition alleged that officials were hesitant to utilise public funds without written authorisation from higher-ups, being fearful of falling foul of the NPP's anti-corruption crusade, slowing their responsiveness. Clearly there were issues, as the president had to revive the office of the Commissioner-General for Essential Services, aiming to expedite approvals and lawfully requisition state facilities and resources.

As on earlier occasions, what is inspiring and encouraging is how quickly and energetically ordinary people began mobilising themselves and others to provide mutual aid to those in distress, creating WhatsApp groups and sharing information on Facebook pages. It was usually neighbours and nearby residents who rushed to rescue landslide victims, using their bare hands to

remove earth and move building debris. Fishers from Trincomalee transported their boats to Anuradhapura to reach water-logged areas. Small animals, family pets, and roaming dogs and cats were fed and rescued too. In the absence of a single information portal on the location and contact information of those stranded or missing or sick and injured, one person created <https://floodsupport.org/> within hours of the Cyclone's landfall; while two others visualised available data at <https://stats.floodsupport.org/> for rapid assessment and response. Small-scale appeals and requests for help were collated and verified by two photo-journalist activists at <https://tinyurl.com/LKfloods25>. People of all social classes gifted dry rations, water bottles, clothing, period products, medicines, fuel for cooking and transport, blood for the injured, and cash. The prisoners in Colombo's maximum security Welikada jail donated the supplies for their lunch one day to the flood affected. Community kitchens were re-activated to prepare cooked food for delivery to safety centres and others in need. Aid convoys from Galle and Matara, with hundreds of volunteers, are now in affected areas of the hill country, both to distribute relief goods and to remove debris. There has been duplication and wastage of resources too, with some areas and communities receiving too much and others too little. As water recedes in low-country areas, crews have formed to help communities in clearing their homes and public spaces of mud and flotsam, emptying damaged contents, drying whatever can be saved, and beginning the clean-up.

Recriminations

As to be expected, the recriminations have begun. The disaster management system has either not been effective or been overwhelmed or probably both. The considerable focus on institution-building, new legislation, protocols, and processes, after the 2004 tsunami has not yielded expected outcomes for those in suffering since (Diwyanjalee 2025).

Allowing for the unexpected severity of the storm, was its arrival underplayed by state authorities and the private sector so as not to scare away foreign tourists? In an official statement dated 27 November, the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority pronounced, "Sri Lanka remains safe and open for travel and tourism" and that "comprehensive safety measures are in place" (SLTDA 2025). Since taking office, the NPP government has adapted to the harmful perception that tourist receipts are low-hanging fruit for foreign exchange, and that increasing their number is a pathway to "recovery" from the 2021-2023 crisis.

Did warnings reach those most at risk in good time? Were they understood? Many advisories were in Sinhala only. Thirty-eight years after “Tamil also” was recognised as an official language, state institutions such as the Disaster Management Centre, the Irrigation Department, and the Meteorological Department are unable to consistently issue information in the mother-tongue of Tamils and Moors. In desperation, one government parliamentarian appealed on social media for Tamil-speakers to help state institutions with translations as well as in staffing helplines—to which many responded as volunteers.

Unless there is disaster preparedness, it cannot be assumed that people will be responsive to announcements nor equipped to evacuate their homes and possessions at short notice. The 1,385 ‘safety centres’ in operation are make-shift spaces in schools, community centres, and religious institutions, with no opportunity for repurposing for the sheer number to be sheltered, toilets and water, cooking facilities, nor adapted for those with special needs; and no forethought as to safeguards for women’s personal security and child protection.

Twenty years ago, Sri Lanka’s parliament enacted a framework statute for a national policy and plan for the protection of human life and property of the people and the environment, from the threat and danger of national disasters. Yet, what progress have we made in enhancing “public awareness and training to help people to protect themselves from disasters”; in “pre-disaster planning, preparedness and mitigation”; and as we shall soon find out, in “sustaining and further improving post-disaster relief, recovery and rehabilitation capabilities” (Sri Lanka Disaster Management Act 2005, s. 4)?

Shreen Saroor, who is familiar with the experiences of women and affected communities during disasters and in their aftermath, asks some pointed questions:

Why were evacuation orders not enforced in clearly identified high-risk areas? Why did communication networks and emergency logistics collapse in vulnerable districts? Why were officials paralysed by fear of procedural repercussions during a life-threatening emergency? Why did relief, coordination, and rescue begin late despite repeated warnings? Most urgently, how many deaths could have been prevented? (Saroor 2025)

Amitav Ghosh has drawn attention to another small island in the Indian Ocean, to make the point that to be well prepared for extreme weather events, does not require great wealth nor technological prowess. Mauritius has managed to preserve human life in tropical storms through

a sophisticated system of precautions, combining a network of cyclone shelters with education (including regular drills), a good early warning mechanism and the mandatory closing of businesses and schools when a storm threatens. (Ghosh 2025: 37)

Contrasting the two deaths in Mauritius following Cyclone Gamede in 2007, to over 1300 in the US during Hurricane Katrina in 2005, both of Category Three status when they made landfall, he concludes, “early warnings alone are not enough; preparation also demands public education and political will” (Ghosh 2025: 37). Two things scarce in Sri Lanka.

Wake-up call

Cyclone Ditwah must be the wake-up call for course correction by this government and its supporters who brook no criticism of it. It is past time to break from the economic and social policy crafted by and for neoliberal capitalism. Instead of aiming to please the International Monetary Fund and global ratings agencies on “fiscal consolidation” and “debt sustainability”, the NPP must urgently pivot towards the most affected communities in this climate disaster.

This includes a rapid expansion in the breadth and depth of social protection programmes including cash transfers, as well as reviving older ones such as the public distribution system for essential foods. As the Feminist Collective for Economic Justice (2025) observes,

Universal social protection must be considered as part and parcel of disaster preparedness and post-disaster economic and social resilience. This resilience is built through these systems as a sustainable and reliable connection between the state and citizens. Social protection ensures access to critical infrastructure such as healthcare facilities, meal and nutrition programmes, to climate resilient housing and to adaptation financing to support livelihoods.

A massive public infrastructure programme is needed to rebuild not only roads, bridges, irrigation systems, drinking water sources, hospitals, schools, and homes, but also the means of survival and sustenance of millions including the restoration of agriculture. Nature-based solutions for flood mitigation such as planting of mangroves, trees and other vegetation, restoration of wetlands and marshes, recharging of aquifers, and desiltation of rivers and canals. For this, the billions of US dollars currently committed towards debt-servicing must be redirected for public needs and good.

It is the Maldivian ex-president and climate justice campaigner Mohamed Nasheed, and sadly not President Dissanayake nor his cabinet of ministers, who stated the

obvious on 29 November. “[I]t is now impossible for Sri Lanka to stay aligned with the IMF programme” (Nasheed 2025). Nasheed faulted the International Monetary Fund’s debt sustainability analysis template for ignoring the likelihood and impact of climate shocks, and reiterated the call for “automatic debt standstills” in these circumstances.

On the same day, Sajith Premadasa the Leader of the Opposition urged the IMF “to ease the conditions imposed on Sri Lanka...”, in support of relief, recovery, and livelihood restoration (*NewsWire* 2025). It was left ambiguous as to which austerities, and by how much to loosen their noose. In parliament four days later (04 December), Premadasa took the clearer stance of calling on the government to “suspend or reshape” the IMF programme and remove conditions oppressive of the people now reeling from Cyclone Ditwah (*The Daily FT* 2025).

Civil society activists critical of climate and debt injustice, have also urged renegotiation of the IMF agreement; an immediate standstill on debt repayments; and an inclusive loss and damage assessment led by affected communities, in a collective statement.

The great flood of 2025, as explained earlier, is not the first-time rivers and reservoirs overflowed without respite, nor torrents of muddy earth raced down from above flattening homes and fields, and deluging humans, animals, and plants. Tragically, it will not be the last such calamity. The question for the government and citizens alike is, what are we going to do differently and how, before the next *ṭūfān*?

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