

Over 200 dead in worst Sri Lankan floods in 60 years

By our correspondents
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More than 200 have been killed and over 175,000 people left homeless due to raging floods and related landslides, which hit five southern districts in Sri Lanka on Saturday. According to government officials, more than 700 people are missing, adding to fears that the death toll may further increase. Many of the homeless are crowded into makeshift refugee camps without even basic facilities.

The hardest-hit district of Ratnapura, southeast of the capital of Colombo, has experienced its worst flooding since 1947. The other districts are Galle, Matara and Hambantota in Southern Province and Kalutara in Western Province.

Although the rain eased on Monday, there have been further reports of flooding and landslides. In Ratnapura district, a landslide buried about 25 people yesterday. Electricity and telephone lines are broken in many areas and will take days to restore.

In Ratnapura, most of the victims were buried alive in 12 major landslides and mudslides. At Palewala in the Alapatha area, a whole village was buried and more than 70 people were believed to have been killed. Rescue workers managed to recover 34 bodies by Sunday night but faced difficulty reaching the affected area due to flooding and mudslides. At least 22 people were feared dead after an earth slippage at Abeyapura.

The town of Ratnapura is completely submerged by floodwaters, which reached more than two metres on Saturday causing severe damage to power and telephone lines. Thousands of houses have been damaged and a large number have been destroyed. In the district, 9,400 families have been displaced, including 5,100 families from the Alapatha area alone.

In Matara district, the second worst affected, 10 bodies have been recovered and over 25,000 families have been made homeless. About 200 houses have

been buried and more than 100 people are missing after landslides in the areas of Morawaka and Deniyaya.

In the Southern Province, the towns of Galle, Matara, Hambantota and Tangalle received their highest rainfall since 1968. Several hundred people have been left homeless and more than 100 missing. In Galle district as a whole, more than 5,000 families have been displaced.

In the district of Hambantota, 22 deaths have been reported and 200 families rendered homeless. Of these 21 died in a landslide at Katuwana. In Kalutara district, south of Colombo, the remote towns and villages of Bulathsinhala, Baduraliya, Meegahatenna and Yatigampitiya are submerged and transport has been disrupted. More than 10,000 people have been displaced in the worst floods in more than 70 years.

Both government and opposition leaders have visited the flooded areas and expressed their concern about the plight of the victims. Prominent media coverage was given to a tour by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinge and his instructions to government officials to provide relief. Not to be outdone, President Chandrika Kumaratunga dispatched leading opposition figures and announced that she would release assistance funds if necessary.

But when our correspondents visited a refugee camp at the Palawela Ratnakara School, the gulf between propaganda and reality was all too evident. More than 3,000 people were gathered at the school from Batakada and Abeyapura—two badly affected villages. More than 4,000 people have lost everything.

About 28 houses were buried in landslides killing an estimated 70 people. Two young men, Ranjith and Saman, told us that government authorities had not provided any equipment to dig for the bodies. “They did not even provide us with a mamoty [a type of

spade] to remove earth,” they said.

Although the refugees have been at the school since Saturday evening, they have not even been given a mat to sleep or sit on. Nearby villages have provided meals as the government has not provided enough food. There are more than 500 children under the age of five. The school has only two toilets and there is no clean water, raising fears of an epidemic.

The people were wearing what they wore on the day they fled. They have no candles or kerosene to light a lamp. All of the villagers are very poor, earning their living on rubber estates, at gem mining or as casual day labourers. “Parliamentarians come in queues when there is an election, but no one is to be seen now. An opposition parliamentarian came and went. But that is all,” one commented.

The government and the media have attempted to portray the tragedy as a natural disaster. It is certainly true that there has been torrential rain in the affected areas. However, extensive gem mining in some parts of the Ratnapura district and the clearing of reserved forest have compounded the danger of landslides.

In parts of Palawela and Batagoda, poor people, without land or shelter, cleared patches of reserved forest. Government officials told them to leave but provided no place to go. Even when it was discovered that the land was unstable and prone to landslide, the squatters remained. To secure their votes, politicians offered to give them title to the land, although the dangers were by then well known.

One person explained: “People in this area faced floods and landslides in 1982. It was not as severe as this but it took the life of several dozen people. But what the people got as relief was just 1,000 rupees [about \$US30 at the time] for each family. Who could cope with such a meagre sum! So they went back to same places again.”

The situation is no different today. The government has announced a payment of 15,000 rupees (about \$US160) per victim. But this is completely inadequate for families who have to try to rebuild their lives from scratch. Moreover, nothing will be done to address any of the underlying problems that compounded the disaster.

Once the immediate impact of the flooding has passed, the government, the opposition and the media will drop their feigned concern and leave the victims to

their fate.

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