

Sri Lanka tea workers struggle in poverty. Flooding cost many their lives.

By Krishan Francis and Sibi Arasu
The Associated Press

CRAIGHEAD ESTATE, Sri Lanka — Arumugam Manikavalli, awakened by ferocious rain and rumbling earth, fled her home for the safety of a nearby temple on the tea estate where she works. That same November evening, tea worker Kumaran Elumugam’s small home was crushed by a landslide, killing six family members.

He survived only because he was away, at work, along with a daughter.

“My wife, son-in-law, daughter, mother-in-law, two grandsons are all dead,” Elumugam lamented. “The small one (granddaughter) is still under the mud.”

Elumugam and Manikavalli were among the fortunate to reach safety as heavy rains from Cyclone Ditwah led to floods and landslides across the South Asian island nation, killing more than 640 people and leaving more than a hundred missing. Multiple villages were submerged by landslides that left behind a rubble of cement, wood, and roofing. In one area, the wreckage was dotted with clothing, schoolbooks, toys, and a sports trophy.

Among the hardest hit were the hilly regions in the island’s center and the tea plantation workers who live there. Many occupied primitive, 150-year-old structures that were swept away in the landslides and flooding. Social workers said these plantation workers, already living in extremely distressed conditions, are now in an even more desperate situation.

Poorly paid tea plantation workers worst hit by the disaster

Most tea plantation workers in Sri Lanka belong to the Malaiyaha Tamil ethnic group. Descendants of Tamil indentured laborers who were brought to work from southern India by British colonists more than 200 years ago, over 1 million people belong to this community, the fourth-largest ethnic group on the island.

Sri Lanka grows some of the world’s finest tea, bringing billions of dollars into the country. But most Tamils in the hill regions earn well below the minimum wage of 1,200 rupees (\$4) per day, with little or no access to education, healthcare, or good jobs.

A report by the American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies said most tea plantation workers own no land or homes and are living in colonial-era working quarters barely bigger than 100 square feet but accommodating as many as eight family members. Multiple houses share bathrooms or have no sanitary facilities.

Many of the tea plantations, on flatter ground, were unaffected by the cyclone



while the workers’ homes, which were closer to mountain slopes, were destroyed, said Melanie Gunathilaka, a Colombo-based climate activist and researcher.

“The settlements were in much more dangerous areas,” she said. “This shows the amount of value placed on the lives of these people.”

The Planters Association of Ceylon, the association for Sri Lanka’s tea companies and estates, didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment.

The government said more than 100,000 houses were destroyed or damaged across Sri Lanka. It has promised compensation packages to rebuild houses or to find safer lands and build new houses.

Sundaralingam Pradeep, Sri Lanka’s deputy minister for plantations and community infrastructure, told The Associated Press that the government is negotiating with the tea companies to identify lands to build homes for all those affected by the disaster, including retirees still living in company line houses.

The minister said an Indian-assisted project to build 7,000 homes will provide the first batch of houses for the impacted

workers.

Tea workers say help can’t come soon enough.

“It doesn’t feel safe to be living here,” said Karuppiah Kamani, pointing to a huge rock next to her home at the edge of a tea plantation.

Sellamuttu Darshani Devi, another tea worker, and her family were asked to move as a precaution after the worst landslides. That’s been routine for years, she said. Her house has so far been unaffected, but she’s afraid to go back now.

“We are so scared when it rains,” Devi said.

She said despite the disaster she had to go pick tea leaves at the estates even now as tea company owners refused to provide any support unless they work. “When it gets sunny, the authorities tell us to go back. We need a home desperately,” she said.

Sri Lanka is vulnerable to climate change, but debt hampers readiness

Sri Lanka accounts for less than 1% of planet-warming gasses in the atmosphere but is considered among nations most at risk from the extreme weather made worse

HOSTILE WORK ENVIRONMENT.

Arumugam Manikavalli, top photo, stands at the doorway of her living quarters after Cyclone Ditwah led to floods and landslides at Craighead Estate in Nawalapitiya, Sri Lanka. In the bottom photo, mud fills the remains of a worker’s living quarters at a tea plantation after a landslide at Craighead Estate. (AP Photos/Eranga Jayawardena)

by climate change.

According to the United Nations, Sri Lanka loses more than \$300 million every year from climate-triggered extreme weather. At least 750,000 people are affected every year by extreme weather and nearly 19 million of Sri Lanka’s 23 million people live in low-lying, landslide-prone, or other disaster-vulnerable areas.

But building resilience is difficult. The country owes billions of dollars to the International Monetary Fund, other multilateral development banks, countries such as China, Japan, and India, and some private banks and private lenders. Sri Lanka is highly dependent on tourism, which was hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. Severe economic problems led to mass protests and the eventual ouster of the nation’s established political elite.

“In countries like Sri Lanka, disasters don’t break the system. What disasters do is they expose the already broken systems,” said Sandun Thudugala of the Colombo-based nonprofit Law and Society Trust. Thudugala said Sri Lanka needs to rethink how it builds and plans, he said, taking into account a future where extreme weather is the norm.

Climate activist Gunathilaka said the country’s debt burden has forced it to prioritize economic growth above everything else so they can repay on time. She said that Sri Lanka could prioritize building climate-resilient homes, invest in early warning infrastructure, and have more money to respond to disasters if they didn’t have to worry about the billions in loans and high interest rates that they come attached with.

Global leaders have acknowledged that countries need trillions of dollars to adapt to climate change.

For the people in Sri Lanka’s hill provinces, the need is urgent.

“We are so scared, anything can happen anytime here,” said Chellaya Pathmanathan, a tea plantation worker whose family is sheltering in a government school after their home was damaged. He said the family doesn’t have enough food to eat.

“We want to create a safe future for our kids. I hope someone can help us,” he said.

AP photographer Eranga Jayawardena contributed to this report. Arasu reported from Bengaluru, India.

The Associated Press’ climate and environmental coverage receives financial support from multiple private foundations. AP is solely responsible for content.

Tibetans depart Nepal, a former safe haven transformed under Chinese pressure

By Manish Swarup, David Goldman, and Aniruddha Ghosal
The Associated Press

DHARAMSHALA, India — Sonam Tashi refuses to let his son inherit the same fear.

Once active in the Free Tibet movement in Kathmandu, he found himself silenced. Unable to secure identity papers for his son, he left for the Tibetan capital in exile in India last year where his son will begin an education he can’t have at home.

There he joined a rare protest in a city so reminiscent of what Kathmandu once was — where monks walk freely and the Dalai Lama’s portrait is not a risk.

An investigation by The Associated Press found that much of the Chinese technology used to surveil Tibetans in Nepal originally came from American

companies. Despite warnings that Chinese firms were copying or outright stealing their designs, these firms built, customized, and expanded China’s surveillance apparatus over the past quarter-century.

Born in Nepal to Tibetan refugees, Tashi spent years on the frontlines of protest, a regular presence outside the Chinese embassy in Kathmandu. In the early days, arrests were brief — just a day or two — but by 2015, police were holding protesters for weeks. The crowds thinned. Eventually, Tashi was one of the last still showing up.

Surveillance trailed them beyond the protests.

Police began showing up hours before any gathering could start, demanding answers to questions they shouldn’t have

known to ask: What are you doing tomorrow? Where are you going?

Cameras multiplied — around Tibetan settlements, in temples, even near private homes. In Boudha, the comfort of lingering beneath the stupa’s all-seeing eyes curdled.

Now 49, Tashi is focused on his 10-year-old son. Once an organizer, he’s now just a father trying to get his son out — before the net pulls tighter. On a winding bus ride toward the Indian border, Sonam stared out the window as terraced hills gave way to forest, thinking about what comes next.

“There are cameras everywhere,” he said. “There is no future.”

This surveillance has helped silence Nepal’s once-vibrant “Free Tibet” movement. Thousands of Tibetans once

fled to Nepal every year, but last year, the number was down to the single digits, according to Tibetan officials in Nepal.

Across the world, in Washington, D.C., Namkyi’s eyes hold the loneliness that haunts Tibetans in exile.

Arrested at 15 and sentenced to three years in prison for protesting Chinese rule, Namkyi travelled to the U.S. to recount her story of what it means a lose a home.

Dressed in black, with two small pins — Tibetan and American — on her coat, she recounts how under withering surveillance, silence has become survival for Nepal’s dwindling Tibetan community.

“They know they are being watched,” she said.

Her eyes shine, not with certainty, but with the fragile hope that being heard might one day matter.