

Sri Lanka Brief Update

Impact of Cyclone Ditwah on Upcountry/Malaiyaha Tamil Community

02 February 2026



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Continuing Marginalisation and Disproportionate Impact on Malaiyaha (Upcountry) Tamils Following Cyclone Ditwah.

1. Cyclone Ditwah (26–29 November 2025) [produced Sri Lanka's worst flooding and landslide disaster in two decades](#), affecting all 25 districts and more than 2.2 million people nationwide. Although the destruction was widespread, the Upcountry/Malaiyaha Tamil population—one of Sri Lanka's most structurally marginalised groups—was among the hardest hit and remains among the least supported.
2. [Nationally](#), 639–646 people were confirmed dead, up to 203 remain missing, and over 2.2–2.3 million people were affected. Between 6,000–6,176 houses were fully destroyed and more than 108,000–114,000 were partially damaged. In districts with large Malaiyaha Tamil communities—Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, and Badulla—home destruction was especially high. Kandy recorded 1,815 fully and 13,422 partially damaged houses; Nuwara Eliya 767 fully and 3,742 partially damaged; and Badulla 404 fully and 7,291 partially damaged. The collapse of already overcrowded and fragile plantation line rooms has left many families without safe shelter.
3. Evidence from various sources indicates that only a fraction of the Malaiyaha Tamil community—likely around 100,000 to 150,000 people—remains in plantation labour. This estimate aligns with long-term declines in estate employment, a growing shift towards alternative work, and the entrenched hardships that have shaped estate life for generations. While exact numbers remain difficult to verify, the social and economic context clearly points to a shrinking plantation workforce.
4. Following the cyclone, the government pledged Rs 25,000 for cleanup and up to Rs 5 million for rebuilding. Yet many [Malaiyaha Tamil families have not received](#) even the initial payment because they lack land ownership, making

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them ineligible under the current relief criteria. This converts a long-standing historical injustice into a current policy failure, where seemingly neutral procedures reproduce discrimination.

5. Tamil Progressive Alliance leader MP [Mano Ganesan has appealed to the United Nations](#), warning of systematic exclusion of Hill Country plantation communities from post-disaster reconstruction and the Rebuilding Sri Lanka housing scheme, even as other affected households become eligible for significant land and housing grants.
6. [Land insecurity remains a central barrier](#). Plantation Minister Samantha Vidyaratna has acknowledged the difficulty in granting Rs 5 million compensation to families who possess no deeds (- Anthony Jesudasan of the CCMR).
7. The crisis highlights pre-existing vulnerabilities—poverty, insecure housing, and lack of ownership—that prevent many Malaiyaha Tamils from qualifying for compensation. [The State must therefore adopt a participatory process](#) when selecting relocation sites, involving affected communities, relevant government institutions, civil society, the NBRO, and plantation companies. Ensuring land rights and adequate housing is essential to ending the centuries-long injustice they continue to face (- PARL).
8. Cyclone Ditwah also reinforced how the plantation population is treated as a group apart. As noted by a community leader, [“Our identity as Malaiyaha Tamils matters, but within the State, we are still viewed as a separate ‘plantation community,’ not as citizens with equal rights.”](#) Infrastructure neglect across districts such as Badulla—where 11 Regional Plantation Companies oversee 247 divisions—meant that basic preparedness measures, including early warning systems, were largely absent (-Nadesan Suresh, Uva Shakthi Foundation Executive Director).
9. [Women in plantation estates face additional burdens](#): the absence of State support services, lack of welfare officers, poor sanitation, and unsafe housing leave them extremely vulnerable during crises (- Activist V. Weerasingham).
10. [Estate management structures also continue to control essential aspects of daily life](#), from housing to utilities, effectively maintaining “captive labour” conditions and obstructing disaster response. Until plantation settlements are brought under local government authority and recognised as villages, residents will remain trapped in this administrative grey zone (- Activist Vijayagowri Palaniyappan).
11. The cyclone has ultimately exposed and intensified long-standing inequalities. Many families remain excluded from compensation due to the lack of deeds, relief has been slow to reach remote estates, and language barriers continue to block access to essential information. The disaster has magnified

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decades of neglect in housing, livelihoods, and services, leaving families without income or adequate support. Education has been disrupted by damaged roads and schools, while the prolonged crisis has heightened mental health strain and increased domestic violence.

- 12.** A more equitable recovery requires Tamil-language access across all processes, prioritised housing for plantation communities, mobile administrative teams to speed up assessments, and compensation mechanisms that recognise land insecurity. Restoring livelihood support for tea and agricultural workers—who sustain much of the Upcountry economy—remains essential for a just and inclusive recovery.

The End.