

Cyclone Ditwah and the Politics of Recovery in Sri Lanka

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Summary

In late November 2025, Cyclone Ditwah struck Sri Lanka and caused severe flooding and landslides, leaving hundreds dead or missing and generating economic losses estimated at between three and five per cent of the country's gross domestic product. The disaster has unfolded within a highly polarised political environment, complicating recovery efforts, testing state capacity and raising questions about disaster governance and the political implications of post-crisis response.

Cyclone Ditwah, which lashed Sri Lanka in late November 2025, has inflicted extensive destruction across the country. Torrential rains triggered widespread flooding and landslides, displacing tens of thousands of people. With more than 400 confirmed fatalities and hundreds still unaccounted for, it is the country's worst natural disaster since the 2004 tsunami. Major infrastructure, including roads, bridges and housing, has been severely damaged, while [agricultural livelihoods](#) have been disrupted. Preliminary government [estimates](#) place total losses between US\$6-7 billion (S\$8-9.4 billion).

The scale of the impact of the cyclone challenges the narrative of economic stabilisation that successive governments have advanced since 2023 under the International Monetary Fund (IMF) programme. Fiscal consolidation, anchored in revenue mobilisation, has taken place alongside persistent poverty and widening inequality. Since the 2019 pandemic, [national poverty](#) has doubled and now affects roughly a quarter of Sri Lanka's population. Cyclone Ditwah will delay the recovery of the fragile economy, [exacerbate social grievances](#) over inequity and state capacity and intensify debates about the social consequences of austerity and the current IMF reforms.

In the aftermath of the cyclone, the Sri Lankan government [requested](#) US\$200 million (S\$ 270 million) from the IMF through a Rapid Financing Instrument. [Opposition Leader Sajith Premadasa](#) of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya has called the government to withdraw the 2026 Budget and present a revised fiscal plan commensurate with the needs of the 1.5 million affected people. The [IMF indicated](#) on 5 December 2025 that Sri Lanka is expected to receive rapid access to approximately US\$350 million (S\$469 million), the sixth tranche under the Extended Fund Facility, within two weeks. International assistance has also flowed in, including over US\$2 million (S\$2.7 million) from [the United States](#) and US\$1 million (S\$1.3 million) from [China](#), while India played a leading role in immediate emergency response operations.

Politics of Disaster Management

A year into its tenure, the Anura Kumara Dissanayake administration has undertaken [several high-profile arrests](#), convictions and investigations involving former president, Ranil

Wickremesinghe, members of the Rajapaksa family, ex-cabinet ministers and senior officials. This anti-corruption drive has contributed to its political legitimacy. However, Cyclone Ditwah represents its first major test in crisis governance.

The government [mobilised security forces](#), police and disaster management authorities to conduct rescue operations, evacuate threatened communities and provide emergency shelter. The government announced a [comprehensive relief package](#), including compensation for houses destroyed by the disaster and a cash compensation of LKR25,000 (S\$104) per disaster victim. Urgent repairs to damaged roads and critical infrastructure were also ordered.

Despite these measures, opposition parties and actors have accused the government of negligence in preparedness and response. They claim that early warnings issued on 12 November 2025 by the Meteorology and Irrigation Departments were not acted upon. The decision to declare 28 November 2025 a public holiday, alongside the failure to declare a State of Disaster under Sections 11 and 12 of the Disaster Management Act, has been [criticised for slowing the mobilisation of key agencies](#). [Tamil political parties](#) also criticised the government for failing to release critical official disaster-related communications in Tamil, despite it being an official language, thereby excluding Tamil-speaking minorities who lived in the worst hit areas such as the central and eastern provinces.

As part of its reconstruction strategy, the government has [appointed a Management Committee](#) for the 'Rebuilding Sri Lanka' Fund, composed largely of the country's wealthiest business leaders. Civil-society organisations have questioned this decision, arguing that a committee dominated by corporate elites is not representative of communities most affected by the disaster. Concerns relate to the absence of local authorities, women's organisations, social-sector specialists and community-level responders, raising broader issues about whose perspectives will shape reconstruction priorities and how equitably assistance will be distributed.

Cyclone Ditwah has exposed Sri Lanka's infrastructure weaknesses, gaps in disaster preparedness and persistent social inequalities. Beyond delaying economic recovery, the disaster is a test for the Dissanayake administration's political credibility at a time when a fragmented opposition is seeking to regain relevance after its collapse in legitimacy during the 2022 economic crisis. Short-term crisis management is likely to dominate the government's agenda in the coming months, making the pursuit of long-term climate and economic resilience an increasingly complex challenge.

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