

THE SRI LANKA HOUSEHOLD DISASTER GUIDE

Know what to do.

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YOUR HOUSEHOLD CARD 6 min

My Divisional Secretariat (DS) division

Our nearest safety centre

Where we meet

117 119 1990

✂ Tear out along the dotted line

Floods

Landslides

Cyclones & high wind

Tsunami

Lightning

KNOW WHAT TO DO

The Sri Lanka Household Disaster Guide

Floods · Landslides · Cyclones and high wind · Tsunami · Lightning

Edition 1 · Published by CIVSAR, Civilian Search and Rescue

Edited by Kalan Weerabaddana, Moshain Dareeju, Kaveesha Shavinda and
Sanuka Weerabaddana

Prevent · Protect · Rescue

**CIVSAR is a volunteer initiative, not an emergency service. In an emergency,
dial 117.**

Before you read anything else



Fill in the card on the next page. It takes six minutes. If you do nothing else with this book, do that.

The card is the only part of this book that works when the book is lost, wet or left behind. It is designed to be torn out along the perforation and kept in a wallet, a school bag, a purse, or taped inside a cupboard door.

YOUR HOUSEHOLD CARD



Tear out along the dotted line. Fill it in with a pen, not a pencil.

Where I live

My district _____

My Divisional Secretariat (DS) division _____

My Grama Niladhari (GN) division, name and number _____

Why the DS division matters more than you think. Landslide warnings in Sri Lanka are issued by NBRO for named DS divisions, not for whole districts. A warning that says "Pasbage Korale" is useless to a family that has never learned it lives in Pasbage Korale. Learn the name. Teach it to your children. ^{[1]-[3]}

The people who reach me

My Grama Niladhari's name and telephone _____

Our nearest safety centre - the building _____

The route I will walk to it _____

An out-of-area relative or friend everyone in the family will call _____

(Choose someone in a different district. When the local network is jammed, a distant number often still connects, and one person outside the disaster can hold everyone's news.)

Where we meet

If we are separated and cannot get home, we meet at:

1. Just outside the house _____

2. Elsewhere in the village or ward _____

3. Outside the area entirely _____

My river gauge

Only if you live near a river. Copy the three numbers for your nearest gauging station from the Irrigation Department bulletin - see Ladder 2 in the Warning Decoder.**

Station name _____

Alert level _____ Minor Flood level _____ Major Flood level _____

Units: **feet** ☐ **metres** ☐ - copy the unit exactly. Some Sri Lankan stations report in feet and most report in metres. Do not convert. ^{[4][5]}

Numbers that work

117: Disaster Emergency Hotline (DMC) ^{[6][7]}

119: Police emergency ^[8]

1990: Suwa Seriya ambulance, free, islandwide ^[9]

1919: Government Information Centre ^[10]

My nearest hospital _____

My nearest fire station _____

My Public Health Inspector (PHI) _____

Sri Lanka has no single national fire number. Fire brigades are run by municipal and urban councils, so the number that reaches a fire engine is a local one. Write yours in. In July 2026 the DMC advised the public to dial 117 when a fire brigade hotline was out of service. ^[11]

Who in this house needs more time

Name anyone who cannot leave in ten minutes without help; a baby, someone elderly, someone who cannot walk unaided, someone on regular medication, someone who is pregnant.

Their medicines, and where the medicines are kept _____

Signed _____ Date filled in _____

Check this card every year before the monsoon. Numbers change. Children grow. Someone moves out.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK



This book has five parts, and they are not meant to be read in order.

Part 1 RIGHT NOW. For the moment something is happening. Every chapter is titled with a situation, not a topic, so you can find yours in seconds. Read it once now so you know it is there; find it again when you need it.

Part 2 THE WARNING DECODER. The centre pages. Sri Lanka's warning services issue numbered and colour coded levels, and almost nobody has ever been told what those levels ask a household to do. This part is the translation. If you read only one part in advance, read this one.

Part 3 BEFORE. What to do in the weeks when nothing is happening. This is where the lives are saved.

Part 4 AFTER. Coming home, staying well, and the illnesses that follow floodwater and kill people who survived the flood itself.

Part 5 THE PEOPLE WHO TRAIN FOR THIS. Who published this book, and how to be useful next time.

Three promises this book makes

Nothing in this book requires a phone, a signal or electricity. Every instruction you need in the first 72 hours is printed on paper. Where we give a website or an app, it is a convenience, never the only route.

Every number, level and safety instruction that rests on an outside authority is referenced. A number in square brackets, like [1], points to the numbered References at the back, which give the source and the date CIVSAR last opened it. Where something could not be confirmed, this book says so instead of guessing.

This book never tells you to wait for permission. Some warnings will not reach you. Some sirens will not sound. Where the natural world is telling you something, this book tells you to act on it.

What this book is not

CIVSAR is a volunteer organisation. It is not an emergency service, it does not direct disaster response, and it has no authority to order an evacuation. This book carries no instruction of its own that contradicts the Disaster Management Centre, the National Building Research Organisation, the Department of Meteorology or the Irrigation Department. Where those bodies speak, this book explains what they said. Where they are silent on what a household should do, this book says what is known to keep people alive, and shows you the evidence.

In an emergency, dial 117. This book is not a substitute for that call.

WHY THIS BOOK EXISTS



In the sixteen years from 2010 to 2025, disasters in Sri Lanka killed about 1,328 people, displaced roughly 1.5 million, and affected more than 15 million. Floods and landslides are what displace Sri Lankan households nearly 900,000 people driven from home by those two hazards alone. Cyclones and landslides are what kill them. ^[12]

Then came **Cyclone Ditwah**. It made landfall on 28 November 2025. It killed 646 people, left 173 missing, affected about 2.2 million people across all 25 districts, damaged or destroyed around 114,000 houses, and put 233,000 people into safety centres at its peak. Months later, in February 2026, 155,000 to 165,000 were still displaced. ^{[13][14]}

The hill country was worst hit. **As reported on 30 November 2025, while the event was still unfolding**, Kandy had 52 dead and 105 missing and Badulla 49 dead mid event counts, not final district tolls. ^[15] Nuwara Eliya town went underwater for the first time in sixty years. At Gammaduwa, 540.6 mm of rain fell, described by Meteorological Department officials as possibly the highest recorded in Sri Lanka in recent history. ^[15] At Peradeniya the Mahaweli Ganga rose to 14.13 metres against a Major Flood level of 9 metres. ^[16]

Sri Lanka's warning system worked better than most people realise. NBRO issued landslide warnings by DS division. ^[2] The Irrigation Department published river levels against thresholds. ^[5] The Meteorological Department issued red warnings. ^[17] The information existed.

What did not exist was the sentence that turns a warning into a decision in a particular house.

There is no published guide that tells a family in Sri Lanka what an amber landslide warning means for their evening. The Irrigation Department's river bulletin lists three flood thresholds for forty odd stations and carries no legend explaining any of them. ^[5] The Disaster Management Centre publishes public leaflets on earthquakes and tsunami the two hazards that kill the fewest Sri Lankans in an ordinary decade and none on floods, landslides, cyclones or lightning, which account for very nearly all the deaths. Its one general preparedness guide is not published in Tamil at all. ^[18]
^[19]

That last point is not an administrative detail. In the week after Ditwah, an analysis of official communication found that landslide alerts, river flood warnings and **emergency helpline information** were posted without Tamil versions; that the Meteorological Department's extended 36-hour forecasts had no Tamil equivalent at all; that afternoon forecasts routinely lacked the Tamil the morning ones carried, putting Tamil-speaking fishing communities twelve hours behind; and that place

names appeared only in Roman script, so a Tamil reader could not tell whether a warning was about their own division. ^[20]

Roughly one in four Sri Lankans belongs to a Tamil-speaking community. ^[21] Among them is the estate community living on the highland slopes of Nuwara Eliya, Badulla and Kandy, the exact ground where Ditwah's landslides killed the most people, and the community with the lowest digital literacy in the country at 44.6 per cent, against a national 65 per cent. ^[22] For those households a printed guide in Tamil, handed over by the Grama Niladhari, is not a fallback. It is the only channel that works.

This book is published in Sinhala, Tamil and English, together, from one manuscript. No page exists in one language and not the others.

The conviction this organisation was founded on, stated at its inaugural meeting: any disaster can be mitigated if people know what to do.

This is the book of what to do.

PART 1 — RIGHT NOW



Find your situation. Read only that page.

If this is happening	Turn to
Water is rising around my house	<i>When water is rising around my house</i> p. 8
I am in floodwater and I cannot get out	<i>If I am in floodwater and cannot get out</i> p. 10
A landslide warning has been issued for my area	<i>When a landslide warning is issued for my area</i> p. 11
I can see the signs of a landslide starting	<i>When I can see the signs of a landslide starting</i> p. 12
A cyclone or severe storm is coming	<i>When a cyclone or severe storm is coming</i> p. 13
The ground is shaking, or the sea has pulled back	<i>When the ground shakes, or the sea pulls back</i> p. 15
There is lightning	<i>When there is lightning</i> p. 16
I have to leave my house now	<i>When I have to leave my house now</i> p. 17
Someone is hurt	<i>When someone is hurt</i> p. 18
We are cut off - no power, no water, no phone	<i>When we are cut off</i> p. 21

WHEN WATER IS RISING AROUND MY HOUSE



Decide early. The decision gets harder every ten minutes.

Floods in Sri Lanka rarely arrive as a wall of water. They arrive as a slow argument with yourself, contemplating whether it is bad enough to leave. People die in that argument.

Leave now if any of these is true:

- Water has entered the house and is still rising.
- Water outside the house is moving, and is above the ankle-level.
- Your Grama Niladhari, the police, or the DMC have told the area to relocate.
- The river gauge for your station has reached the **"Minor Flood"** level and is still rising (see *Ladder 2* in the Warning Decoder).
- You would need further assistance to leave, or someone in the house would. **You go one level earlier than everyone else.**
- It is dark, or it is about to be. Evacuating in darkness through moving water is far more dangerous. If you are thinking about it at dusk, go at dusk.

In the ten minutes before you leave

1. **Switch off the mains electricity at the board** before water reaches it, not after. Then switch off the gas cylinder at the valve.
2. Take the household card, the go-bag, medicines, identity documents, and the phone with its charger and power bank.
3. Move what you can upstairs or onto high shelves. **Give this two minutes, not twenty.** Possessions can be replaced, not lives.
4. Lock the house. Take the key.
5. Tell a neighbour where you are going. Tell your out-of-area contact.

Moving through water : the two rules that kill people who ignore them

Do not walk into moving water. Fast moving water only 15 cm (6 inches) deep can knock an adult off their feet. ^[23] Once you are down in a current you have very little control over what happens next. If you must cross standing water, use a stick to test each step ahead of you, as floodwater hides open drains, missing manhole covers, washed-out road edges and debris.



Do not drive or ride into floodwater. Rushing water only 30 cm (12 inches) deep can carry away most cars, and 60 cm (2 feet) can carry away larger vehicles. ^[23] The situation is worse for motorcycles and three

wheelers. If your vehicle stalls in rising water, get out and get to higher ground, do not stay with the vehicle.

Never

- Never touch a fallen electrical line, or water that a fallen line is touching.
Assume every line is live.
- Never let children play in floodwater. It carries sewage, chemicals, and after the water comes into houses, displaced snakes.
- Never go back for possessions.
- Never swim in floodwater to reach somewhere.

IF I AM IN FLOODWATER AND CANNOT GET OUT



- **Do not fight the current.** Go feet-first and downstream, on your back, with your feet up to fend off obstacles. Aim yourself across the flow towards the edge, not against it.
- Grab anything fixed and above the water: a tree, a post, a roof, a wall.
- **Get up to a higher level, and keep going.** If you are in a house that is filling, go up. Take something to signal with: a torch, a bright cloth, a whistle, a mirror, the phone. Take drinking water if it is within reach.
- **Do not go into a closed roof space without a way out onto the roof.** People have drowned in closed roof spaces (between the ceiling and roof) they could not get out of. If the only way up is into a sealed roof space, take something to break through the roof tiles or sheets, to climb onto the roof.
- Once you are on a roof or a high point, **stay put and make yourself visible.** Do not attempt to swim to another building.

If you see someone else in the water

Throw. Do not go. A rope, a plastic can, an empty sealed bottle, a tyre tube, a long branch. Most people who drown in floods drown trying to save someone else. Call **117** and **119**, and give the location as precisely as you can, the GN division, the nearest junction, a landmark that a stranger could find.

WHEN A LANDSLIDE WARNING IS ISSUED FOR MY AREA



NBRO issues landslide early warnings at three numbered, colour-coded levels, for **named Divisional Secretariat divisions**, not whole districts. Find and write down your DS division name on your household card. ^{[1]–[3]}

LEVEL 1 · YELLOW · Be aware

Tonight: stay alert and keep watching the weather. Charge phones and power banks. Move valuables and documents into one bag. Check on the neighbours who would need help to leave. Walk your evacuation route in daylight so you know it in the dark.

LEVEL 2 · AMBER · Be alert and be ready to leave

This is the level people mistake for: "wait and see." It is actually: "packed and dressed."

Put the go-bag by the door. Everyone sleeps in clothes they could walk out in, with shoes beside them. **If you have anyone who needs help to move, start moving now, not at Level 3;** that includes small children, elderly relatives, anyone who cannot walk unaided, and anyone pregnant. Move livestock. Keep one person awake at all times, to watch if rain continues into the night, and to check whether the warning level escalates.

LEVEL 3 · RED · Evacuate

Leave your house now. Follow the instructions of the disaster management officials in your area. Do not wait for the rain to stop, as most slopes fail during or shortly after heavy rain, and some fail after the rain has stopped. Do not go back for anything.

The rainfall behind the levels

NBRO's regional warnings are triggered against rainfall thresholds of roughly:

- **75 mm in a day for Level 1 (YELLOW ALERT)**
- **100 mm in a day for Level 2 (AMBER ALERT), and**
- **150 mm in a day or 75 mm in a single hour for Level 3. ^[24] (RED ALERT)**

You do not need to measure rain yourself. But if you think that 150 mm has fallen on your slope and no warning has reached you, treat that as the warning.

Districts where NBRO operates landslide early warning

Badulla · Galle · Hambantota · Kalutara · Kandy · Kegalle · Matala · Matara · Nuwara Eliya · Ratnapura, **and adjoining areas designated by NBRO. ^[25]**

This list is not necessarily complete. Monaragala and Kurunegala have both appeared in recent NBRO warning bulletins. **Do not conclude from this list that no warning applies to you, look for your own Divisional Secretariat division in the bulletin itself.**

WHEN I CAN SEE THE SIGNS OF A LANDSLIDE STARTING



A warning may never reach you. The slope will tell you first. These signs call for evacuation, irrespective of whether the warning level has or has not been issued.

NBRO tells the public to watch for: **cracks appearing in the ground; trees, poles or walls beginning to lean; unusual seepage of water from the slope; and falling rocks.** ^[26]

Also treat as a warning:

- New cracks in walls, floors or the ground, especially cracks that widen while you watch.
- Doors or windows that suddenly jam when they used to close.
- A stream that turns from clear to muddy, or a spring that appears where there was none.
- A stream in heavy rain that suddenly stops flowing can mean debris has dammed it upslope, and the dam will not hold.
- A low rumbling that grows louder, or the sound of trees cracking.
- Ground that feels soft or moves under weight, where it never did.

If you see these: get out of the path of the slope, sideways and out, not downhill ahead of it. Move across the slope to stable ground. Warn the houses below you, as they are in more danger than you are, and they cannot see what you can see. Then call **117**.

If you cannot get out in time: curl into a tight ball and protect your head. It is a poor option, but better than standing.

WHEN A CYCLONE OR SEVERE STORM IS COMING



Sri Lanka's cyclone window is the second inter-monsoon, roughly in **October and November**, when cyclone systems form in the Bay of Bengal. Cyclone Ditwah came ashore on 28th of November, 2025. ^[14] The 1978 cyclone hit Batticaloa on the 23rd of November and killed about 915 people. ^[27]

The Department of Meteorology issues the warnings.

The meaning of the warnings are confirmed as follows:

- **Amber means heavy rain above 100 mm at some places.**
- **Red means very heavy showers exceeding 150 mm.**

Lower-tier notices are issued as an *Advisory*. Warnings for strong winds are issued by province and district; warnings for rough seas and high waves are issued by named sea area. ^{[17][28]}

When a warning is issued the day before

- **Fishing families: bring the boat in and stay in harbour until the marine warning is lifted.** Do not go out on a falling forecast.
- Fill every container you have with drinking water, and fill the bathroom bucket for washing. Water supply commonly fails before, during and after cyclones.
- Charge every device.
- Buy or set aside a week of food that needs no cooking and no refrigeration.
- Cut back branches that overhang the house or the power line, if there is still daylight and it is safe.
- Bring inside or tie down anything that can be blown away by the wind: roofing sheets, planks, furniture, water tanks, tools, gas cylinders.
- Put important documents in a sealed plastic bag or box.
- **Know which room in your house is the safest.** It can be the smallest room on the lowest floor, with the fewest and smallest windows, with walls on all sides. Usually a bathroom, a storeroom or an interior passage.
- Agree with your family: at what point do we leave for the safety centre? Write the answer on the card.

During

- Stay in the safe room. Keep away from every window, including seemingly "safe" ones. Flying debris may break glass, at speeds which can injure people.
- Keep your shoes on. Keep the torch in your hand, not in a drawer.

- Listen to a **battery radio, not the phone**. The phone is for calling for help and its battery is worth saving.
- **If the wind suddenly stops and the sky clears, do not go outside**. That may be the eye (center) of the storm. If so, the wind will return within minutes, or up to an hour later from the opposite direction, at full strength.
[29] Wait for the official 'all-clear', to confirm whether the cyclone has truly passed over.
- If the roof begins to fail, get under a strong table or into the smallest interior space you have, and cover your heads.

After the wind stops

- Assume every fallen line is live.
- Do not walk about in the dark. Wait for light before you inspect anything.
- Beware of standing water, damaged bridges, and trees that are still coming down.
- Check on neighbours who live alone.

WHEN THE GROUND SHAKES, OR THE SEA PULLS BACK



This is the page to read before you need it.

Sri Lanka's tsunami warnings are issued by the DMC, with technical information from the Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning System. ^[30] **But the warning may not reach your village.** The country's network of 77 coastal warning towers was reported in November 2024 to have only 22 of 77 operational, and in November 2025 the DMC's Director-General stated that all towers were inactive; reactivation was promised. ^{[31]—[33]}

Therefore, this book teaches the rules that do not depend on any tower, any siren, any phone or any official at all.

The natural warning

Any one of these is itself the warning. Do not wait for a siren, a message, or anyone's permission. ^[34]

1. **Shaking strong enough that it is hard to stand**, or shaking that goes on for a long time, for twenty seconds or more.
2. **The sea suddenly withdraws**, exposing reef, sand and fish that were underwater a moment ago.
3. **A loud roar from the sea**, like a train or aircraft.

Then

Go inland and uphill immediately, on foot. Do not stop to collect anything. Do not go to the beach to look in 2004 large numbers of people walked towards the exposed seabed. Do not use a vehicle if there is any chance of traffic; roads out of coastal towns jam within minutes and a jammed car is a trap.

Aim for high ground first, distance second. If there is no high ground within reach, go up to the third floor or above of a strong reinforced-concrete building, as high as you can get, and onto the roof if you can.

The first wave may not be the largest. Waves continue arriving for hours. ^[34] Stay high until the authorities say it is over, and not until the water goes back out, because it may come again, even stronger than before.

Take the household card if it doesn't interfere with a quick escape.

Remember: Everything else can be replaced. Not Lives.

On 26 December 2004 the Indian Ocean tsunami struck Sri Lanka's coast with no warning at all, worst in Ampara, Batticaloa, Hambantota, Galle, Matara, Trincomalee and Mullaitivu. Almost nobody on those beaches knew that a receding sea is a warning. That is the single piece of knowledge this page exists to pass on.

WHEN THERE IS LIGHTNING



More than fifty people are reported to die from lightning strikes in Sri Lanka each year, more than many of the disasters that make the news. ^[36] The risk peaks in the first inter-monsoon, in **March and April**, when afternoon thunderstorms occur island-wide.

The rule: if you can hear thunder, you can be struck

Thunder is the warning. If you can hear it at all, the storm is close enough to strike you. So, go to a safe place now. ^[36] Do not wait for rain. Lightning can strike ahead of a storm and behind it, out of a sky that still looks clear.

Stay in your safe place for 30 minutes after the last thunder you hear. ^[36]^[37] Most people struck by lightning are struck before the rain starts or after it stops, because that is when they expect it the least.

Inside

- Stay off corded telephones. Keep away from plumbing such as taps, pipes, showers. Do not bathe or wash during a storm.
- Unplug what you can, before the storm arrives rather than during it.
- Keep away from windows and doorways.

Outside, with no building to reach

- **A car or a bus with a metal roof and the windows up is good shelter.** ^[36] An open three-wheeler, a motorcycle or a bicycle is not.
- **Get away from water** immediately: paddy fields, tanks, rivers, the sea.
- **Do not shelter under an isolated tree.** Sheltering under a tree is the second leading cause of lightning casualties. ^[38]
- Put down and get away from anything long or metal: umbrellas, a mamoty, a fishing rod, an aluminium ladder.
- Do not be the tallest thing in an open space, and do not stand on a ridge or a hilltop. **Keep moving towards a building or a hard-topped vehicle.** Do not stop and crouch. Crouching does not protect you and delays you from going to a safe place.
- If you are in a group in the open, **spread out.** One strike can injure a whole cluster of people at once.

If someone is struck

A person struck by lightning carries no electrical charge. It is safe to touch them immediately. ^[38] Check whether they are breathing. If not, start CPR (see *When someone is hurt*, p. 18) and send someone to call **1990**. The majority of people survive lightning strikes. Begin actions to preserve life straight away.

WHEN I HAVE TO LEAVE MY HOUSE NOW



The ten-minute departure

Practise this once a year, with a timer, with the whole family. It is the single most useful drill a Sri Lankan household can do.

Minute 0–2: People.

Everyone accounted for by name, out loud. Shoes on. Anyone who needs help gets an assigned helper: decide *now*, not then. If someone is not home, do not wait past your agreed departure time; you will meet at the rendezvous on the card.

Minute 2–4: The bag and the papers.

The go-bag (see *The go-bag*, p. 32). Medicines and the list of what they are. Identity documents, deeds, bank books, school certificates in one sealed bag, kept in one known place. The household card. Phone, charger, power bank.

Minute 4–6: The house.

Mains **electricity off** at the board. **Gas off** at the cylinder. **Water off**. Windows and doors shut and **locked**. Valuables and electrical items moved as high as you can in the time you have.

Minute 6–8: Animals.

Untie livestock and move them to high ground. Take pets; take a leash or a basket. If you truly cannot take animals, leave them free, untied, with water and food where they can get to a higher altitude.

Minute 8–10: Out.

Tell one neighbour. Message your out-of-area contact: *where you are going, who is with you, that you are moving now*. Go by your planned route. If your route is blocked or under water, go to the alternative you chose: **do not improvise through water**.

What to take

1. People, and the help they need to move
2. Medicines and prescriptions
3. Identity-verifying and legal documents in a water-tight box/bag.
4. Drinking water and any food you already have packed
5. Charged phone, charger, power bank, torch, cash in small notes.
6. Warm dry clothes, sarong or cloth, a mat or a sheet
7. Baby needs: formula, bottles, nappies, a familiar toy
8. Everything else, only if there is time and hands

Cash in small notes matters more than people expect. Card machines and ATMs fail with the power and the network, and nobody at a roadside shop can change a five-thousand-rupee note during a crisis.

WHEN SOMEONE IS HURT



Call 1990 for Suwa Seriya, the free national ambulance service, islandwide, 24 hours. ^[9] If you cannot get through, call 117 or 119.

While you wait, these four things save lives.



Severe bleeding

Press hard, directly on the wound, with the cleanest one within reach, but do not spend time looking for a clean one. **Keep pressing without lifting to look.** If blood soaks through, add another cloth on top and keep pressing. Keep the person warm and lying down.

If severe bleeding from an arm or a leg will not stop with hard direct pressure, apply a tourniquet. A belt, or a strong folded cloth twisted tight with a stick. Put it on the limb **above the wound**, tighten it until the bleeding stops, **write down the time**, and **do not loosen it**. Get to the hospital. ^[39]

Do this yourself. Do not wait for someone trained to arrive: in a cut-off village at night, nobody may come for help, and a person can bleed to death from a limb in minutes.

Someone not breathing — CPR

1. Check for response from the casualty by shouting and shaking from the shoulders. No response and no normal breathing?
2. Appoint someone nearby, directly, to call **1990**. If you are alone, call and put the phone on speaker.
3. **Keep the heel of one hand in the centre of the chest, other hand on top, elbows straight, press down hard, about 5 to 6 cm, and fast: about 100 to 120 times a minute.** Let the chest come all the way back up between each press. ^[40]
4. **Do not stop.** Swap with someone else every two minutes if you can; it is exhausting and tiring rescuers push too shallow. If you feel or hear a pop, crack, or crunch, do not stop CPR. A broken rib is treatable, but a stopped heart is fatal within minutes.

For an adult who has collapsed, compressions alone will do. Doing it imperfectly is enormously better than not doing it.

For a child or a baby, this is different.

A child or baby who collapses has almost always run out of air, so **give breaths as well as compressions**. Open the airway, give **2 breaths**, then **30 compressions and 2 breaths**, repeating.

Child: tilt the head back, heel of one hand (or two hands if you need them) in the centre of the chest, pressing down about **one third of the depth of the chest, roughly 5 cm.**

Baby under one year: keep the head level, not tilted back, as tilting a baby's head back closes the airway. **Two fingers** in the centre of the chest, about **4 cm**, and give small puffs of breath, not full lungfuls.

Same speed for all ages: **100 to 120 times a minute.** ^{[41][42]}

Someone pulled from water

Drowning is different from a heart attack, and the difference matters. A drowning person has run out of air, so **air is the first thing they need.** ^{[43][44]}

1. Get them out of the water and lay them on their back, facing upwards.
2. **Do not roll them over to drain water, and do not delay to clear the mouth,** sweep out only what you can see and easily reach. Do not dig deep into the airway.
3. To give rescue breaths, **open the airway with a head-tilt chin-lift, pinch the nose closed, and give a 1-second breath** while watching the chest rise. **Wait for the chest to fall, and repeat the breath again. 2 rescue breaths** at a time is standard procedure.
4. Then **30 chest compressions and 2 breaths**, and keep repeating.
5. Send someone to call **1990**.

If you cannot or will not give breaths, do compressions alone: that is far better than doing nothing.

However, for a drowning person, and above all for a child, the rescue breaths matter.

Everyone pulled unconscious from water must go to hospital even if they seem to recover, because the lungs can still fail hours later.

Snakebite

Floodwater displaces snakes into houses, gardens and debris, and Sri Lanka has a high burden of venomous bites.

- **Keep the person still and calm.** Movement and high heart rate (due to fear or agitation) moves venom throughout the body faster. Carry them; do not let them walk if it can be avoided.
- **Immobilise the bitten limb** as you would a fracture, and keep the person as still as possible. Do not raise or lower the limb dramatically: stillness is what matters. ^[45]
- **Get to a hospital immediately.** Antivenom is held in Sri Lankan hospitals; nothing you do at home is a substitute.
- **Do not** cut the wound. **Do not** suck the venom. **Do not** apply a tight tourniquet. **Do not** apply ice, chillies, herbs or a "snake stone." ^{[45][46]} **Do not**

waste time hunting or capturing the snake, but if you saw it clearly, describe it, or photograph it from a safe distance if that costs no time.

- Remove rings, bangles and watches from the limb before it swells.

Also

- **Burns:** cool under clean running water for twenty minutes. ^[47] Do not apply oil, toothpaste, butter or ash. Cover loosely with clean cloth or cling film. Generic gauze should not be applied on burns, as it can damage fragile skin or not be fully sterile.
- **Broken bones:** support and immobilise in the position found. Do not straighten.
- **Head injury with any loss of consciousness:** Take the casualty to the hospital, always, even if they seem fine.
- **Cuts sustained in floodwater are not minor.** (See the leptospirosis and tetanus warnings, p. 37).



No power, no water, no network, roads gone: This is the ordinary condition of the first two to five days after a serious natural disaster in Sri Lanka, and it is survivable with what you already have.

Water — the first priority

A person needs about three litres a day to drink, more in heat and more if working. Plan on **four litres per person per day** for drinking and basic hygiene, and hold at least three days of it. ^[48] (See *The household store*, p. 33).

If you run out and must use what is available:

- **Let cloudy water settle first**, then pour off the clear water through a clean cloth before boiling.
- **Boiling is the most reliable method you have at home.** Bring water to a rolling boil and keep it boiling for at least one minute. ^[49] Let it cool, while keeping it covered. Boiling kills many microorganisms; it does not remove chemicals.
- **Never drink floodwater**, however clear it looks. It carries sewage and, in Sri Lanka after floods, leptospirosis-causing bacteria.
- **Do not assume your well is safe once the flood recedes.** Flooded wells must be cleaned and disinfected before use. **Contact your Public Health Inspector (PHI)**, who does this work. ^[50] Write your PHI's contact number on your household card.

Light and power

- Torches and a battery radio, with spare batteries stored separately are life-savers. A power bank should be charged before the disaster-heavy season, not during it.
- **Candles and oil lamps in a flooded house are a fire risk** among gas, spilled fuel and damaged wiring. Use a torch if you have a choice.
- Charge phones in the car if you have one and it is safe to run it. **Never run an engine or a generator inside a house, a garage, or under a closed veranda.** The exhaust gases kill without warning and without smell (due to Carbon monoxide poisoning). ^[51]

Information when the network is down

A **battery or wind-up radio** is the single most reliable channel in a Sri Lankan disaster, and the cheapest thing on this list. Write your local radio frequencies into

"Write your radio frequencies here" in the Warning Decoder now, while you can look them up.

Phones — making a small battery last

Keep the phone on airplane mode between checks. Screen at lowest brightness to save the charge. **Send a text or a message rather than calling:** a message gets through a congested network when a call will not, and uses a fraction of the power. One agreed out-of-area contact holds the family's news so that ten people are not making ten calls.

Sanitation

If the toilet cannot be flushed, do not use it. Line a bucket with a heavy plastic bag, use it, seal it, and store the bags well away from where people eat and sleep and well away from any water source. **This is not against squeamishness. After a flood, sanitation failure is what turns a disaster into an outbreak.**

Food

Eat what will spoil first. Once the power has been off for at least **four hours**, treat refrigerated meat, fish and milk as unsafe. Keep the fridge and freezer shut, as a full freezer holds safe temperatures far longer than an empty one. Dry rations, tinned fish, biscuits and jaggery need no cooking and no power.

Throw away any food that has touched floodwater, including anything in a screw-top jar or a plastic-wrapped packet. Sealed metal tins can be kept if you wash and disinfect the outside of the tin, including the top.

PART 2 — THE WARNING DECODER



The centre pages. Designed to be pulled out and pinned up.

Sri Lanka issues good warnings. What it has never published is the line that connects a warning to a household's evening. These four pages are that line.

WHO TELLS YOU WHAT

The warning	Who works it out	Who tells the public
Landslides	NBRO , National Building Research Organisation, from a network of 330 automated rain gauges and Met Department forecasts	NBRO, then DMC, then police, army, local officials, temples and social media
River floods	Irrigation Department , Directorate of Hydrology and Disaster Management, which owns the gauges and sets the thresholds	Irrigation Department bulletin, republished by DMC
Rain, wind, rough seas, cyclones	Department of Meteorology	Department of Meteorology, then DMC and the media
Tsunami	Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning System, INCOIS (India), Australian Bureau of Meteorology, Indonesian agency	DMC
Getting any of it to your village	-	DMC , and your Grama Niladhari
Relief and compensation afterwards	-	NDRSC , National Disaster Relief Services Centre, through your Divisional Secretariat and GN

[1]—[6] [1.7] [2.8] [3.0] [5.2] [6.3]

The DMC is the executing agency of the National Council for Disaster Management, established under the Disaster Management Act, No. 13 of 2005. [5.4] [5.5]

Two things worth knowing about this table. The DMC does not generate the science; it is the body that carries the warning to you, which is why 117 is the number on your card. And the NDRSC, not the DMC, handles relief and compensation: a household that telephones the DMC about a damaged house is calling the wrong organisation.

[6.3]

LADDER 1 - LANDSLIDE · NBRO · three levels

Issued for named Divisional Secretariat divisions. Know your DS division name. ^[1] ^[3]



Level	Colour	What it is called	What your household does
1	Yellow	Be aware / Watch	Stay alert. Watch the weather and the slope. Charge phones. Documents into one bag. Walk your route in daylight. Check on neighbours who would need help.
2	Amber	Be alert	Packed and dressed, not wait-and-see. Bag by the door. Sleep in clothes you could walk out in, shoes beside the bed. Anyone who needs help to move leaves NOW. Move livestock. One person stays awake if rain continues.
3	Red	Evacuate	Leave immediately , following the instructions of disaster management officials. Do not wait for the rain to stop. Do not go back.

Rough rainfall triggers: Level 1 $\approx$ 75 mm/day · Level 2 $\approx$ 100 mm/day · Level 3 $\approx$ 150 mm/day or 75 mm in one hour. ^[24]

Warnings run on a rolling 24-hour window and are extended or revised. A warning that has expired has not necessarily become safe, check for the next bulletin. ^[1] ^[3]

LADDER 2 - RIVER FLOOD · Irrigation Department · three thresholds

The Irrigation Department publishes water levels for about 42 gauging stations across the major river basins, against three thresholds per station, several times a day during the season. DMC republishes it. **The bulletin carries no legend telling a household what to do. This is that legend.** ^{[4] [5]}

Threshold	What your household does
Alert Level	Start watching the bulletin, not the weather. Move valuables up. Fill drinking water containers while the supply is still clean. Charge everything. Confirm your route and your safety centre. Tell anyone who needs help to move that they may be leaving tonight.
Minor Flood Level	People who need help to move go now. Everyone else: bag by the door, vehicles moved to high ground, livestock moved, electricity ready to switch off at the board. If the level is still rising, do not go to sleep on it.
Major Flood Level	Leave , unless an official instruction tells you otherwise. At Peradeniya during Ditwah the Mahaweli reached 14.13 m against a Major Flood level of 9 m - more than five metres past the threshold. Thresholds are the beginning of major flooding, not the worst it can get. ^[16]

Direction of travel matters as much as the number. The bulletin reports each station as rising, falling or steady. *Alert and rising* is more urgent than *Minor and falling*.

Copy your own station's numbers here

Find your nearest gauging station in the bulletin and write the three numbers down once, so that during an event you only have to read one figure and compare.

My station _____ Basin _____

Alert _____ Minor Flood _____ Major Flood _____

Units - feet ☐ metres ☐

Do not convert the units. Most Sri Lankan stations report in metres, but some report in feet - Nagalagam Street on the Kelani Ganga is given in feet. Copy the unit exactly as the bulletin prints it. A household that converts is a household that misreads the one number that mattered. ^{[4] [5]}

Some published thresholds, as at 28 November 2025 ^{[4][5]} - check yours against the current bulletin; they are revised.

Basin	Station	Unit	Alert	Minor	Major
Kelani Ganga	Nagalagam Street	ft	4.00	5.00	7.00
Kelani Ganga	Hanwella	m	7.00	8.00	10.00
Kalu Ganga	Putupaula	m	3.00	4.00	5.00
Mahaweli Ganga	Peradeniya	m	5.00	7.00	9.00
Malwathu Oya	Thanthirimal e	m	5.00	6.80	7.80

LADDER 3 — WEATHER · Department of Meteorology

What is confirmed, and what is not. The rainfall figures below come from Department of Meteorology advisories and are confirmed. Whether the Department operates these as a formal numbered colour ladder, and whether a Yellow tier exists, **is not confirmed**. So read the three below as what each notice means, not as steps on an official scale. Check the Department's own bulletin.

Notice	Rainfall meaning	What your household does
Advisory	General caution for heavy rain, strong wind or lightning	Note it. Bring in loose objects. Check that the go-bag exists. Fishing families check the marine forecast before going out.
Amber	Heavy rainfall above 100 mm at some places	Treat as the day to prepare. Water containers filled, phones charged, documents bagged, vehicles moved off low ground. Do not start a journey through hill country or across low-lying roads.
Red	Very heavy showers exceeding 150 mm	Stay home unless you are leaving for a safety centre. Expect the power and the water to fail. Expect roads to close. 150 mm in a day is at or above NBRO's Level 3 landslide trigger - if you live on a slope, this warning is also about your slope.

Wind warnings are issued **by province and district**; rough sea and high wave warnings **by named sea area**, which is why fishing communities must listen for their sea area and not for their district. ^{[17][28]}

THE ONE THAT HAS NO LADDER: TSUNAMI

There is no level to wait for. The natural warning is the warning to wait for.

Strong or long shaking · the sea withdrawing · a roar from the sea - any one of these means go inland and uphill now, on foot, without waiting for any message.

Full page: (See *When the ground shakes, or the sea pulls back*, p. 15).

This is not a lack of confidence in the DMC. It is because in November 2024 only 22 of Sri Lanka's 77 coastal warning towers were operational, and in November 2025 the DMC's Director-General stated that all of them were inactive, with reactivation promised. Officials note that fifteen other early-warning mechanisms remain in place and that police and armed forces carry warnings to coastal communities in person. ^[31]^[33]
A household should not build its survival on a tower whose status it cannot check.

HOW A WARNING ACTUALLY REACHES YOU

DMC's own documented channels, at village level: *telephones, police vehicle announcements, NGOs, public address systems, sirens, temple and church bells, riders on motorcycles, SMS, early warning towers, media, traditional methods, and early warning committees going door to door.* ^[30]^[52]



In practice, these are the ways a warning may reach you when things get bad:

1. **A person at your door** - Grama Niladhari, police, army, an early warning committee. The most reliable channel Sri Lanka has.
2. **Battery radio.** Works with no power, no network and no smartphone. Write your frequencies below.
3. **Television**, while the power holds.
4. **The DMC Facebook page**, while the network holds - in practice a primary real-time channel. ^[56]
5. **The NBRO Early Warning app** and the **AWARE** SMS platform, if you have installed and registered for them in advance. ^[1]^[57]
6. **A national emergency alert straight to every phone - Sri Lanka does not have this yet.** As of 28 June 2026 the government was still studying an islandwide cell-broadcast system, expedited because of Ditwah, with finalisation estimated two to three months away. ^[58]

FOUR THINGS THAT GO WRONG WITH WARNINGS

"It has been amber before and nothing happened." Most warnings are followed by nothing, because most slopes hold and most rivers stop short. Researchers studying Sri Lanka's landslide early warning found exactly this: warnings do not always reach people, and people often ignore them when they do, with false alarms eroding trust. ^[24] The answer is not to trust warnings more. It is to make the response cheap enough that you do it every time - a packed bag and a night in your clothes cost you almost nothing, and you will do them fifty times before the one time it matters.



The warning names a place you have never heard of. It is naming your Divisional Secretariat division. Learn yours today and write it on the card.

The warning is not in your language. In the week after Ditwah, landslide alerts, river flood warnings and even emergency helpline information went out without Tamil versions; extended forecasts had no Tamil at all; and place names appeared only in Roman script. ^[20] If you are reading a warning that is not in your language, do not guess, ask your GN, ask a neighbour, and check whether the place named is your DS division.

Nobody warned you. Then the slope, the river, the sky and the sea are your warning. Every page in Part 1 is written to work with no warning at all.

PART 3 — BEFORE



This is the part that saves the lives. Everything in Part 1 works better if you have read this one first.

★ THE TEN THINGS — DO THESE THIS MONTH

Each takes under an hour. Together they change what happens to your household.

1. **Fill in the household card.** Six minutes. Tear it out and put it where it will be found.
2. **Learn your Divisional Secretariat division name** - the unit landslide warnings are issued for. Ask at the Divisional Secretariat, or ask your Grama Niladhari.
3. **Get your Grama Niladhari's telephone number** and put it in your phone and on the card.
4. **Ask your GN which building is your safety centre**, and walk the route to it once, in daylight.
5. **Choose one out-of-area contact** and tell every member of the family the number.
6. **Agree three meeting points** and write them on the card.
7. **Pack a go-bag** and put it where you would grab it in the dark.
8. **Put your documents in one sealed bag** in one known place.
9. **Buy a battery radio and spare batteries.** Write your frequencies down.
10. **Run the ten-minute drill once**, with a timer, with everyone at home.

KNOW WHERE YOU LIVE

Sri Lanka is administered in four layers, and warnings and relief travel down all four:

Province (9) → District (25) → Divisional Secretariat division → Grama Niladhari division

Your Divisional Secretariat division is the unit **NBRO issues landslide warnings for**. A warning that names your DS division is a warning about you. A warning that names your district may or may not be.

Your Grama Niladhari division is the unit **everything else runs through**. The GN is the state's lowest-level officer and the hinge of village-level disaster response. Disaster Management Committees exist at district, divisional **and Grama Niladhari level**. Evacuation instructions, safety-centre assignment and critically, **relief eligibility** all pass through your GN: Divisional Secretariats select relief beneficiaries with the assistance of Grama Niladharis. ^{[52] [53] [59]}

A household that does not know its GN officer's name is a household that will be late to every part of this.

Write both on the card. Teach the DS division name to your children the way you teach them their address.



Know your ground. A hand-drawn map of a neighbourhood: roads, open ground and buildings on one sheet. Draw one for your own GN division and mark your safety centre and the route to it.

KNOW YOUR SEASON

Sri Lanka's risk is not random. It arrives on a calendar, and the calendar is the most useful thing in this book for planning.



Season	Months	Where the rain falls	What to be ready for
First Inter-Monsoon	March – April	Island-wide afternoon thunderstorms	Peak lightning risk. Sudden severe local storms, high winds
South west Monsoon (Yala)	May – September	Southwest quarter and central highlands: Colombo, Gampaha, Kalutara, Galle, Matara, Ratnapura, Kegalle, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya	Landslides and flash floods. This is when NBRO warnings cluster
Second Inter-Monsoon	October – November	Island-wide heavy rain	Cyclones. The Bay of Bengal window. Ditwah, 28 November 2025; the 1978 Batticaloa cyclone, 23 November
Northeast Monsoon (Maha)	December – February	North and east: Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, Vavuniya, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Ampara, Polonnaruwa, Anuradhapura	Flooding in the dry-zone river basins

The four-season structure is well established; the exact month boundaries above are indicative and shade into each other differently from year to year.

Confirm against the Department of Meteorology's seasonal forecasts rather than treating the dates as fixed.

Use it like this. Two weeks before your season opens, do the annual check at the end of this part. If you live on a slope in Kandy, your season starts in May. If you live in Batticaloa, it starts in December. If you fish, your season never entirely closes, but October and November are the months to take the marine warnings most seriously.

Which hazard is yours

Landslides: the hill country and the wet-zone slopes. NBRO operates early warning in Badulla, Galle, Hambantota, Kalutara, Kandy, Kegalle, Matale, Matara, Nuwara Eliya and Ratnapura, **and in adjoining areas it designates; Monaragala and Kurunegala have both appeared in recent warning bulletins, so check for your own division rather than assuming this list is complete.** ^[26] About a third of Sri Lanka's population lives in areas assessed as high landslide risk. ^[60]

River flooding: the basins of the Kelani, Kalu, Mahaweli, Gin, Nilwala, Attanagalu Oya, Maha Oya, Deduru Oya, Maduru Oya, Malwathu Oya and others; about 42

gauged stations. ^[4]^[5] Low-lying urban Colombo is its own case: about 70 per cent of Kolonnawa lies below sea level. ^[60]

Cyclone and high wind: the whole island is exposed in the October–November window; the east and north coasts take the direct landfalls.

Tsunami: the entire coastline, with the 2004 event worst in Ampara, Batticaloa, Hambantota, Galle, Matara, Trincomalee and Mullaitivu.

Lightning: everywhere, worst in the inter-monsoon months, and worst for people working outdoors.

Coastal erosion: 62.6% of the shoreline has experienced significant erosion, with local sea level rising about 3.4 mm a year. ^[60] A house that was a safe distance from the sea thirty years ago may not be now.

THE GO-BAG



One bag per household that can be carried by one person, plus a small bag for anyone old enough to carry their own. Keep it where you would find it in the dark, in the rain, in thirty seconds. Not in a locked cupboard. Not at the back of a loft.

In the bag

Water and food: three litres of drinking water per person, which is **one day's drinking water, not three** (the three-day supply lives in the household store at home), and food for three days that needs no cooking: biscuits, dry rations, tinned fish, jaggery, dates, peanuts. A tin opener. Some of it should be food your children will actually eat.

Documents, in a sealed plastic bag; identity cards, birth certificates, deeds, bank books, insurance, school certificates, medical records. **Photograph all of them and keep the photographs somewhere else as well,** in email to yourself or on a second phone.

Medicines: at least a week of anything anyone takes regularly, plus the written list of what they are and the doses, plus spare spectacles. **This is the item people forget and the one they cannot replace at a safety centre.**

First aid: bandages, sterile gauze, antiseptic, adhesive plasters, scissors, paracetamol, oral rehydration salts, any personal medication, gloves.

Light and power: torch, spare batteries stored outside the torch, power bank, phone charger, cable. A whistle costs almost nothing and carries much further than a voice.

Radio: battery or wind-up, with spare batteries.

Clothes: a full dry change per person, a sarong or cloth (which is a towel, a blanket, a sling, a bag and a sunshade), closed shoes, a warm layer for the hill country, a raincoat or a heavy plastic sheet.

Money: cash in small notes. Card machines and ATMs fail with the power.

Hygiene: soap, toothbrushes, sanitary pads, a small towel, hand sanitiser, a roll of heavy plastic bags.

Household card: a copy of it, in the bag as well as in the wallet.

And for the people who need more

A baby: formula, bottles, sterilising equipment, nappies, a change mat, and one familiar toy. **A baby's needs are not optional and cannot be improvised at a safety centre.**

An elderly relative: medicines, spectacles, hearing aid and spare batteries, walking stick, a list of conditions and medications to hand to a nurse.

Anyone with a disability: spare equipment or parts, charger for a powered chair, and a written note of what assistance they need, which saves explaining it repeatedly to strangers.

Pets: lead, basket, food, and a photograph of the animal with you in case you are separated.

Check the bag twice a year. Water goes stale, batteries leak, medicines expire, children outgrow the clothes.

THE HOUSEHOLD STORE

Separate from the go-bag. This is what you live on at home when the road is gone and the shop is shut; the ordinary condition for two to five days after a serious event.

Hold at least three days for every person. A week is better. After Ditwah, roads were cut, 247 km of road damaged, 40 or more bridges destroyed and the railway reduced to a fraction of its network. ^[61] Households in the hills were not reachable quickly.

Water: four litres per person per day: three to drink, one for basic washing and cooking. ^[48] For a family of five, three days, that is sixty litres. Store it in clean, sealed containers, out of sunlight, and replace it every six months.

Food that needs no refrigeration and little or no cooking. Rice and dhal are only useful if you have a way to cook them: keep some gas or a kerosene stove and fuel, or keep food that needs neither.

The rotation rule: store, use, replenish. Do not build a shrine of emergency supplies that quietly expires. Buy a little extra of what you already eat, eat the



oldest first, and replace it on the next shop. A store you eat from is a store that is always in date. Write the month on the lid.

Also hold: matches or lighters in a sealed bag, candles (with the fire caution in *When we are cut off*, p. 21), a rope, a sharp knife, strong plastic sheeting, tape, a bucket with a lid, heavy plastic bags, water purification tablets or bleach with the dose written on it, and a spare gas cylinder if you cook with gas.

MAKE THE HOUSE SAFER

On a slope: do not cut into the slope below or behind your house without advice; NBRO gives slope-stability clearance for building in the hill country and it is worth asking before you dig. Keep drains and surface-water channels clear so that rain leaves the slope instead of soaking into it. Water going into a slope is what brings a slope down. Never dump soil or rubble on a downhill edge. Watch for new cracks after every heavy rain, and report them.

On a flood plain: know the highest point in your house and keep a way to get to it. If you are building or renovating, raise the floor level, raise the electrical sockets and the meter board, and put the main board high. Keep a heavy plastic sheet and sandbags or filled sacks where you can reach them.

On the coast: know your route inland and uphill, and know the strongest tall building nearby.

Everywhere: secure the roof sheets. Cut back the branch that will come through the window. Fix the wall that is already cracked. Fasten tall furniture to the wall. Keep the gas cylinder outside and upright. Know where the mains switch is and make sure everyone in the house, including the children, knows how to switch it off.

THE FAMILY PLAN

A plan is four decisions, made once, calmly.

1. Who helps whom. Name the person responsible for each person who needs help, and name a second person in case the first is not home. Do this out loud, in front of everyone.

2. Where we meet. Three places, in widening circles: outside the house, elsewhere in the area, and outside the area entirely. On the card.

3. Who everyone calls. One out-of-area contact who collects everybody's news, so that ten people are not making ten calls through a jammed network.

4. When we go. The threshold, decided in advance and written down: *We leave when the river reaches Minor Flood and is still rising. We leave at amber, not red, because Amma cannot walk fast. We leave when it is dark and the rain has not stopped.*

That fourth decision is the whole point. A family that has decided its threshold in advance does not have the argument at the worst possible moment, in the dark, with water coming in. It just goes.

Tell the school, tell the workplace

Ask your children's school what its plan is and where children are taken. Agree in advance whether you collect them or the school holds them, a parent driving into a flood to fetch a child who is already safe is one of the commonest ways this goes wrong.

PRACTISE — THE TEN-MINUTE DRILL

Once a year, before your season starts. Announce it, set a timer for ten minutes, and run *When I have to leave my house now* (p. 17): shoes on, bag found, mains switched off, everyone out of the door, walk the route to the safety centre.

You are testing four things. Can the person who needs help actually get out in ten minutes? Is the bag where you thought it was? Does everyone know the route, including the children? Does the plan survive one person being absent?

It will go badly the first time. That is what it is for. The drill is cheap; the discovery during an actual flood is not.

Make it ordinary. Do it before the monsoon, the way you clean the gutters before the monsoon.

PEOPLE WHO NEED MORE TIME

Plan around them, not for them. Every threshold in this book moves one level earlier for a household that includes someone who cannot move quickly.

Infants and small children: :- a child who cannot walk must be carried by a named person. Formula and nappies must be in the bag, not on the shopping list. Tell children in advance, calmly, what will happen. The as the plan is far less frightening than the surprise.

Elderly relatives: :- medicines and a written list; spectacles; hearing aid batteries; a walking aid that will work on wet ground. Someone who lives alone needs a neighbour who has agreed, in advance, to come and get them.

Anyone with a disability: :- the plan must be theirs, not made about them. Ask what they need. Write it down. Check that your route is one they can use, and that the safety centre is one they can use. Many actually use as many are schools, and many schools have steps.

Anyone pregnant: :- go earlier, always. Carry maternity notes in the document bag.

Anyone on regular medication: ☹️ a week in the bag, the prescription photographed, and the condition written down where a stranger can read it.

Livestock: ☹️ animals that are tied down. Decide now where they go and who moves them, and do it at amber. Livestock is a family's savings, and people die going back for savings.

★ THE ANNUAL CHECK — DO THIS TWO WEEKS BEFORE YOUR SEASON

- ☐ Household card re-read and corrected: numbers, names, who lives here now
- ☐ Go-bag opened: water replaced, batteries checked, medicines in date, clothes still fit
- ☐ Household store rotated and topped up to three days minimum
- ☐ Documents still sealed, still complete, photographs still backed up
- ☐ Radio tested, spare batteries bought
- ☐ Torches tested
- ☐ Gutters, drains and surface channels cleared
- ☐ Overhanging branches cut back; roof sheets checked
- ☐ Route to the safety centre walked, and the alternative route walked
- ☐ GN officer's number confirmed: GNs are transferred
- ☐ Ten-minute drill run with a timer
- ☐ Neighbours who live alone checked on, and agreements confirmed
- ☐ River gauge thresholds re-checked against the current bulletin

PART 4 — AFTER



More people are harmed in the weeks after a Sri Lankan flood than during it. This part is about not becoming one of them.

GOING BACK INTO THE HOUSE

Do not go back until the authorities say the area is safe, and on a slope, that judgement is not yours to make. Ground that failed once is more likely to fail again, and a damaged slope can move days after the rain has stopped.

At the gate, before you go in

Look at the building from outside. **Do not enter** if you can see cracks that were not there before, a wall that is bowing or leaning, a sagging roof or ceiling, a floor that has dropped, or the building sitting differently on its ground. Get it inspected.

Look at the ground around it: new cracks, new seepage, ground that has slumped.

Assume every fallen electrical line is live, and assume any water it touches is live.

Going in

Do not switch on the electricity. Leave the main switch off until the wiring and the meter board have been checked by an electrician. Water inside a socket or a board does not announce itself.

Do not use a naked flame until you are sure there is no gas leak. If you smell gas, do not switch anything on or off, open the doors and windows, close the cylinder valve if you can reach it safely, and get out.

Open up and let it dry. Doors and windows wide, for days.

Watch for snakes and for what floodwater brings in. Snakes, rats and insects come into houses with the water and stay after it. Wear closed boots and gloves. Use a stick, not a hand, to move debris, wet furniture, and anything you cannot see under or behind. Do not put a bare hand into standing water or under a sodden mattress.

Photograph everything before you clean it. Room by room, damage by damage, with something in the frame for scale. This is what a relief and compensation claim rests on, and once you have cleaned up you cannot get it back.

THE ILLNESSES THAT COME AFTER THE WATER

Leptospirosis :- **read this page even if you read nothing else in Part 4**

Leptospirosis spreads through water contaminated by the urine of infected animals, especially rats. It enters through cuts, grazes, and the soft membranes of the eyes, nose and



mouth. **Every person who has waded, worked or played in floodwater is exposed,** and wading in floodwater is a recognised route of infection. ^[62] It is endemic in Sri Lanka. ^[63]

Symptoms usually begin 5 to 14 days after exposure, and can take anywhere from 2 days to a month, so a fever three weeks after the flood still counts. ^[62] ^[63] **The picture is sudden fever, severe headache, and severe muscle pain, classically in the calves.** Red or bloodshot eyes. Vomiting. Later, jaundice (**which is** yellowing of the eyes and skin), and reduced urine.

Go to a hospital or a doctor early, and say the sentence that matters:

"I was in floodwater on [date]."

Say it even if you are only there about a fever. That one sentence changes what the doctor tests for and what they treat, and leptospirosis is treatable when it is caught early and dangerous when it is not.

To reduce the risk: cover every cut and graze with a waterproof dressing before going into floodwater or mud. Wear boots and gloves for cleaning up. Wash with soap and clean water after any contact. Keep food and drinking water away from anywhere rats can reach. **Do not take antibiotics on your own initiative;** preventive treatment is given through the health authorities, so ask your Public Health Inspector or the nearest Medical Officer of Health.

Dengue

Floods leave standing water, and standing water becomes mosquito breeding within days. Sri Lanka recorded **about 35,000 dengue cases and 20 deaths between 1 January and 7 June 2026, roughly 30 per cent above the same period in 2025,** with around half of all cases in the Western Province. ^[64] ^[65] *Figures as surveillance stood in June 2026; check the Epidemiology Unit's current report.*

Within a week of the water going down, walk your compound and empty everything that holds water: **to** tyres, tins, coconut shells, buckets, tarpaulin folds, plant pot saucers, blocked gutters, discarded plastic. Cover water storage. Sleep under a net if you are ill.

Warning signs that mean hospital now, in someone with fever: severe abdominal pain, persistent vomiting, bleeding from gums or nose, blood in vomit or stools, extreme lethargy or restlessness, cold clammy skin, or a sudden drop in temperature with worsening condition. ^[66] **The dangerous phase of dengue often begins as the fever falls.** Do not treat that as a 'recovery'.

Paracetamol only for fever. Do not take ibuprofen, aspirin or similar anti-inflammatory drugs when dengue is possible, they increase bleeding risk. ^[66]

Also

Tetanus: a wound from floodwater, mud, metal or debris needs medical attention and possibly a tetanus booster. **Diarrhoeal illness:** treat with oral rehydration salts and get help early for a child or an elderly person who cannot keep fluids down. **Mould:** a house

that stays damp makes people with asthma much worse; dry it out, and scrub and dry hard surfaces rather than painting over them.

LIFE IN A SAFETY CENTRE

At the peak of Ditwah, 233,000 people were in safety centres. At one count, between 878 and 919 of them operating at once. ^[15]^[61] They are usually schools, temples, kovils, mosques, churches or community halls, designated at divisional and GN level. The DMC publishes a Handbook for Safety Centre Managers in all three languages, so this is a managed system rather than an improvisation. ^[19]

Register on arrival, with every member of the household by name. This is how you are found by relatives, and it is how relief eligibility begins.

Keep together and keep your documents on you.

Hygiene is the whole game. Wash hands with soap before eating and after using the toilet, every time. Crowded shelter plus poor sanitation is how a flood becomes an outbreak. If the toilets are failing, tell the centre manager early rather than quietly avoiding them.

Tell the centre manager about anyone in your household with a medical condition, a disability, a pregnancy, or regular medication. Do it on the first day, not when something goes wrong.

Children need routine more than they need reassurance. Regular meals, regular sleep, a job to do, other children to be with. Keep them in sight; centres are busy and open.

Look out for women and girls travelling without family, and for anyone alone. Raise anything that worries you with the centre manager.

If you are staying with relatives rather than in a centre, register with your Grama Niladhari anyway. Families sheltering with relatives are entitled to dry rations during the period cooked food is being issued at centres, but only if the GN knows you exist. ^[53]

RELIEF AND COMPENSATION

The organisation responsible is the NDRSC (National Disaster Relief Services Centre) working through your Divisional Secretariat, with your Grama Niladhari identifying who is eligible. ^[53] Not the DMC. A household that spends its energy telephoning the wrong body loses days.

What is provided, in outline: cooked meals at centres for an initial period; dry rations to affected families, including those sheltering with relatives; and payments in respect of death, disability, and damage to housing.

What to do:

1. **Register with your GN** as an affected household, whether you are in a centre or with relatives.

2. **Photograph the damage before cleaning**, room by room.
3. **Keep every receipt** for emergency repairs, replacement and temporary accommodation.
4. **Ask your Divisional Secretariat what documents are needed**, and ask for the list in writing.
5. **If your documents were destroyed, say so at the Divisional Secretariat replacing identity documents, birth certificates and deeds is a known part of post-disaster administration and there is a route through it. If your documents were destroyed**, say so at the Divisional Secretariat. Replacing identity documents, birth certificates and deeds is a known part of post-disaster administration and there is a route through it. Start it early; it takes longer than everything else.
6. **Keep a copy of everything you submit**, and note the date and the name of who you gave it to.

AFTERWARDS, IN THE MIND

Fear, sleeplessness, anger, jumping at rain, playing the same minutes over and over, guilt at having survived or at what you did or did not do, these are ordinary responses to something that was not ordinary. They usually ease over weeks.

What helps: getting back to routine, sleeping and eating regularly, being with people rather than alone, doing something useful, and limiting how much you scroll through disaster news and images. ^[67]

Children show it differently; **as** clinging, bed-wetting, returning to younger behaviour, silence, or the disaster appearing repeatedly in their play. Answer their questions simply and honestly, keep routines, and let them help with small tasks. Playing it out is how children process it; let them.

Seek help if after several weeks someone cannot sleep, cannot work, cannot look after themselves or their family, is drinking heavily, or talks about not wanting to go on. Start with the nearest Medical Officer of Health or a hospital, and ask what mental health support is available in the area. **This is a medical need like any other and it is treated.**

And look after the ones who helped. The neighbour who pulled people out, the three-wheeler driver who drove all night, the volunteer who did four days without sleep. They **they** carry it too, and they are the least likely to say so.

HOW TO HELP WITHOUT GETTING IN THE WAY

After Ditwah, Sri Lankans gave enormously. Some of that giving reached people and some of it sat in the wrong village while another village had nothing. This page is about the difference.

The five rules of useful help

1. Do not self-deploy into a disaster zone. Untrained people arriving in private vehicles consume the road space, the fuel, the food and the attention that the response needs. If you are not asked for and not organised, you are a second problem on top of the first. Work through your GN, your Divisional Secretariat, or an organisation that is coordinating with them.

2. Ask what is needed before you collect anything. The most common failure in Sri Lankan relief is not shortage, it is fifty donors sending rice to the same three accessible villages while a fourth, up a broken road, gets nothing. **Ask the GN of a specific division what that division is short of, and send that.**

3. Cash given through an established organisation goes further than goods. It buys locally, which is faster, cheaper, right-sized, and keeps money in the affected economy. Unsorted clothing is the classic example of a contribution that consumes more labour to handle than it delivers in value.

4. Do not photograph people at their worst. Not in a safety centre, not being carried out of a house, not identifiable, not children. A photograph that raises money for you costs them their dignity permanently.

5. Check before you forward. False information travels fastest in the first 48 hours rumours of further storms, of dams breaking, of relief being withheld. If you cannot see where a claim originated, do not pass it on. Forwarding an unverified warning feels like helping and is not.

If you want to be useful next time

The most valuable thing an ordinary person can do is **be trained before it happens, and be part of something coordinated when it does.** Ask your Grama Niladhari whether your GN division has a disaster preparedness committee, and whether it needs people.

PART 5 — THE PEOPLE WHO TRAIN FOR THIS



About CIVSAR

CIVSAR, Civilian Search and Rescue, was formed on 2 December 2025, four days after Cyclone Ditwah made landfall on 28 November, out of the problem this book exists to solve. Civilians moved towards danger by instinct and saved lives doing it, but they did so without structure, training or coordination behind them.

What CIVSAR does now is build civilian capability before disasters, in three areas: **Disaster Risk Reduction**, awareness and preparedness, which is what this book is; **Disaster Risk Management**, crisis decision-making and simulation-based training; and **Disaster Information Technology and GIS**, mapping, data and offline-capable field tools. Support to relief distribution is an intention, not yet a record.

CIVSAR operates on the **Incident Command System**, the same command structure used internationally, so that trained civilians can integrate with a wider response rather than sitting outside it.

What CIVSAR is not. It is a volunteer initiative, not an emergency service. It holds no authority to direct a response or to order an evacuation, and a formal search and rescue role remains a stated future goal rather than a present capability. In an emergency, the number is **117**.

Training and joining. Open registration is called twice a year, with certification developed alongside professionals in the relevant field and delivered through accredited institutions.

Training and enquiries only, these are not emergency numbers. In an emergency, dial 117.

☐ [linkedin.com/company/civsar](https://www.linkedin.com/company/civsar) ☐ [@civsar.official](https://twitter.com/civsar.official) ☐
civsar.official@gmail.com ☐ +94 76 692 6212

This book is not a fundraising document. CIVSAR does not solicit public donations.

NUMBERS

117	Disaster Emergency Hotline, Disaster Management Centre [6][7]
119	Police emergency [8]
118	Police emergency information service [8]
1990	Suwa Seriya, free national ambulance, islandwide, 24 hours [9]
1919	Government Information Centre [10]
011 2136 136	DMC general line [6]
011 2136 222 / 011 2670 002	DMC National Emergency Operation Centre, 24 hours [6]
011 2686 686	Department of Meteorology, weather inquiries [68]
0710 688 872	Department of Meteorology, WhatsApp, messages only [68]

Every number on this page was tested by telephone and confirmed working on _____ (date).

Write in your own:

Nearest hospital _____ Fire station _____

Grama Niladhari _____ Divisional Secretariat _____

Public Health Inspector _____ Electricity fault line _____

Water supply fault line _____ Out-of-area contact _____

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HOW THIS BOOK WAS MADE, AND HOW TO CORRECT IT

This edition was compiled by CIVSAR from the published material of the Disaster Management Centre, the National Building Research Organisation, the Department of Meteorology, the Irrigation Department, the Department of Census and Statistics, United Nations situation reporting on Cyclone Ditwah, and peer-reviewed literature on Sri Lankan early warning.

It contains no instruction that contradicts those bodies. Where they have set a warning level, this book explains it. Where they have not published what a household should do, this book says what is known to keep people alive, and shows you where that came from.

It will contain mistakes. A guide like this is only as good as its next correction. If you find something in these pages that is wrong, out of date, or that did not work when you needed it, write to **civsar.official@gmail.com** with the page number. Corrections are published with each edition and the person who found the error is thanked by name unless they ask otherwise.

Editors: Kalan Weerabaddana, Moshain Dareeju, Kaveesha Shavinda and Sanuka Weerabaddana.

NOTES

(Ruled pages, for your own numbers, your own route, what you learned the last time.)

SECOND HOUSEHOLD CARD



A duplicate of the card at the front. Fill in both. Keep one in the book and give the other to someone outside your household, a relative in another district, or a neighbour.

Tear out along the dotted line. Fill it in with a pen, not a pencil.

Where I live

My district _____

My Divisional Secretariat (DS) division _____

My Grama Niladhari (GN) division, name and number _____

Why the DS division matters more than you think. Landslide warnings in Sri Lanka are issued by NBRO for named DS divisions, not for whole districts. A warning that says "Pasbage Korale" is useless to a family that has never learned it lives in Pasbage Korale. Learn the name. Teach it to your children. ⁽¹⁾⁽²⁾

The people who reach me

My Grama Niladhari's name and telephone _____

Our nearest safety centre - the building _____

The route I will walk to it _____

An out-of-area relative or friend everyone in the family will call _____

(Choose someone in a different district. When the local network is jammed, a distant number often still connects, and one person outside the disaster can hold everyone's news.)

Where we meet

If we are separated and cannot get home, we meet at:

1. Just outside the house _____

2. Elsewhere in the village or ward _____

3. Outside the area entirely _____

My river gauge

Only if you live near a river. Copy the three numbers for your nearest gauging station from the Irrigation Department bulletin - see Ladder 2 in the Warning Decoder.**

Station name _____

Alert level _____ Minor Flood level _____ Major Flood level _____

Units: **feet** ☐ **metres** ☐ - copy the unit exactly. Some Sri Lankan stations report in feet and most report in metres. Do not convert. ⁽⁴⁾⁽⁵⁾

Numbers that work

117: Disaster Emergency Hotline (DMC) ⁽⁶⁾⁽⁷⁾

119: Police emergency ⁽⁸⁾

1990: Suwa Seriya ambulance, free, islandwide ⁽⁹⁾

1919: Government Information Centre ⁽¹⁰⁾

My nearest hospital _____

My nearest fire station _____

My Public Health Inspector (PHI) _____

Sri Lanka has no single national fire number. Fire brigades are run by municipal and urban councils, so the number that reaches a fire engine is a local one. Write yours in. In July 2026 the DMC advised the public to dial 117 when a fire brigade hotline was out of service. ⁽¹¹⁾

Who in this house needs more time

Name anyone who cannot leave in ten minutes without help - a baby, someone elderly, someone who cannot walk unaided, someone on regular medication, someone who is pregnant.

Their medicines, and where the medicines are kept _____

Signed _____ **Date filled in** _____

Check this card every year before the monsoon. Numbers change. Children grow. Someone moves out.

Any disaster can be mitigated if people **know what to do.** This is the book of what to do.

Written for Sri Lankan households facing floods, landslides, cyclones, tsunami and lightning. Every page in Part 1 is titled with a situation, not a topic — find yours and read only that page. Start with the household card: six minutes, a pen, and the one page that still works when the book is lost, wet or left behind.

INSIDE · FIND YOUR SITUATION	
01 Water is rising around my house	02 I am in floodwater and cannot get out
03 A landslide warning has been issued	04 I can see a landslide starting
05 A cyclone or severe storm is coming	06 The ground is shaking, or the sea has pulled back
07 There is lightning	08 I have to leave my house now
09 Someone is hurt	10 We are cut off — no power, water or phone

Level 1 · Yellow Be aware	Level 2 · Amber Packed and dressed	Level 3 · Red Leave immediately
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