

Beyond Memorials: Forging Accountability in Sri Lanka's Disaster Preparedness

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'On the anniversary of the 2004 tsunami, we must move from remembrance to resilient action'

Today, we solemnly commemorate the tragic loss of life from the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and extend our deepest sympathies to the families and communities still enduring its aftermath. That catastrophe laid bare profound systemic failures in preparedness and early warning, failures paid for with immense human cost.



Figure: midday December 26th, 2004, tsunami waves submerged the western, southern, eastern and the northern coasts of Sri Lanka, source www.cnn.weather

Two decades later, we must ask: Is Sri Lanka meaningfully prepared for the next major disaster?

Scientific consensus warns that the Sunda Megathrust continues to accumulate strain, posing a persistent threat of a magnitude 9.0+ earthquake and subsequent tsunami. Yet, our observational and operational readiness reveals alarming gaps. Critical communication systems, such as the VHF, HF, and UHF networks established post-2004, are now largely defunct. Multi-million-rupee investments in tsunami warning towers stand silent and unmaintained. When communication failed during recent crises like the Ditwah Cyclone floods, Sri Lanka's most vulnerable communities were isolated, left without information or recourse.

Parallel failures undermine our resilience to other frequent hazards. Riverine flood early warning systems, for instance, lack the reach and reliability to provide the 12-hour lead time that could save the lives and livelihoods of the people affected in Kelani, Maha Oya, Daduru Oya, and Malwathu Oya etc. In contrast,

nations like Vietnam employ low-cost, high-reach methods, such as lamppost-mounted loudspeakers, to ensure warnings penetrate the last mile. Sri Lanka's continued reliance on fragmented, top-down alerts represents a preventable vulnerability.

Furthermore, scientific risk assessments have not been translated into policy. Detailed hazard maps have done little to curb unsafe coastal development or guide land-use planning. In some areas, population density in high-risk zones has increased since 2005, systematically elevating future disaster exposure.

Underpinning these technical failures is a governance crisis. Disaster preparedness, early warning, emergency response, and relief operations remain hampered by institutional silos and counterproductive personal agendas. This fragmented approach jeopardizes public safety and squanders limited resources.

Therefore, commemoration must catalyse action.

Conduct an Independent Systems Audit: A transparent, non-partisan audit of all early warning and emergency communication infrastructure (tsunami, flood, landslide) is urgently needed. Findings and a rectification roadmap must be made public.

Mandate Community-Led Last-Mile Warning: Every Divisional Secretariat must deploy and maintain at least two fail-safe, low-tech warning methods (e.g., sirens, loudspeaker networks) managed by local volunteers, with mandatory monthly testing.

Enforce Risk-Informed Land Use: Hazard maps must be legally binding for new construction and inform local development plans. A national policy is required to manage settlement in high-risk zones.

Empower a Unified Disaster Management Institute: Establish a single, legally empowered institute with the mandate and budgetary control to coordinate all disaster risk reduction phases (risk assessment, preparedness, early warning, emergency response, relief, and rehabilitation), cutting across ministerial/organisational boundaries to ensure clear accountability (discarding personal prejudices).

Memorials in stone and ceremony are insufficient. The most profound tribute to those lost is a functioning, accountable system that protects the living. The time for criticising past inaction is over. The imperative now is to build the vigilant, coordinated, and resilient Sri Lanka that its people deserve.

"A Call for Action on the 20th Anniversary of the 2004 Tsunami"