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COLOMBO UNDER WATER:
WHEN POLITICAL BLAME CANNOT DRAIN A FLOODED CITY

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An antiquated drainage network, extraordinary rainfall and a political blame game have exposed a problem that cannot be solved by demanding the Mayor's resignation.

Colombo's latest flooding crisis has exposed an uncomfortable truth about the capital's infrastructure. The city's ageing subterranean drainage system was simply not designed to cope with the intensity of rainfall experienced on Friday evening. Yet, even as engineers attempted to explain the extraordinary pressures placed upon an antiquated network, political attention shifted towards an altogether more familiar exercise: finding someone to blame.

Opposition Parliamentarian S. M. Marikar wasted little time demanding the resignation or removal of Colombo Mayor Vraie Cally Balthazar, alleging that blocked drains, neglected culverts and inadequate municipal preparation had contributed to the inundation of roads, residential neighbourhoods and even the surroundings of the National Hospital.

The accusations were politically convenient. It was hard to miss the claimant's politically based bias at Her Worship's discomfort.

According to rainfall figures cited by municipal engineers, approximately 129 millimetres of rain fell within a relatively short period on Friday evening. Colombo's underground drainage network, meanwhile, is reported to have been designed to accommodate rainfall intensities of approximately 30 millimetres per hour.

If the reported rainfall was concentrated within an hour, the intensity would have exceeded that nominal design capacity by more than four times. The precise comparison depends on the actual duration of the downpour and the capacity of individual drainage sections, but the underlying engineering problem is unmistakable.

Colombo was confronting a volume and intensity of rainfall that parts of its drainage infrastructure were never designed to accommodate.

Clearing a blocked drain can improve the passage of water. Desilting a canal can restore lost carrying capacity. Neither intervention, however, can magically transform an underground drainage network engineered for one level of rainfall into a system capable of accommodating four times that intensity.

That distinction is fundamental to understanding what happened.

Marikar pointed to historical rainfall events, including an episode in 1992 when Colombo reportedly experienced rainfall exceeding 400 millimetres without comparable flooding at certain critical locations. But comparing cumulative rainfall totals without examining the duration, intensity, geographical distribution, tidal conditions and subsequent changes to the built environment risks producing a misleading conclusion.

Four hundred millimetres spread over an extended period can present an entirely different hydraulic challenge from 129 millimetres concentrated into a short, violent downpour.

The relevant engineering measurement is not simply how much rain falls, but how quickly it falls and whether the drainage network can discharge that water before surface flooding occurs.

There are other complications. Colombo's drainage network has been affected by decades of urban expansion, encroachment upon waterways, construction over natural drainage corridors, improper disposal of solid waste and the progressive reduction of permeable land surfaces.

High coastal tides can further restrict the discharge of stormwater into the sea, creating additional pressure within an already overloaded system.

These are structural challenges accumulated over successive municipal administrations and national governments. They cannot reasonably be attributed exclusively to a Mayor who has occupied office for only a comparatively short period.

This does not absolve the present administration of responsibility for maintaining drains, preparing for severe weather or coordinating an effective emergency response. Those are legitimate areas for scrutiny, and the public is entitled to know whether scheduled maintenance was completed and whether advance weather warnings prompted appropriate action.

But responsibility must be established through evidence rather than political theatre.

Marikar's demand for the Mayor's removal, without an accompanying technical explanation of how the existing drainage network could have accommodated such an intense rainfall event, risks being perceived as political brinkmanship rather than constructive oversight.

The public might reasonably ask what specific engineering solution the Opposition proposes. Would additional desilting alone have prevented the flooding? Which drainage sections were demonstrably obstructed? What evidence establishes that routine maintenance failures, rather than hydraulic overload, were the principal cause?

And perhaps most importantly, what investment programme would the Opposition support to prevent a recurrence? And in a struggling economy, where does the money come from?

These questions matter considerably more than another resignation demand.

Mayor Balthazar has reportedly initiated discussions with municipal engineers, government agencies, the Presidential Secretariat and military personnel following the flooding. Such coordination is necessary, but emergency meetings cannot substitute for a long-term infrastructure strategy.

Colombo needs a drainage solution, not merely a political explanation.

The immediate priority should be an independent engineering assessment of the city's principal stormwater drainage corridors, identifying their actual carrying capacities, structural deficiencies, maintenance conditions and vulnerability to extreme rainfall.

That assessment should be made public.

The Colombo Municipal Council, working with the relevant national agencies, should establish a phased programme to modernise critical underground drains, remove verified obstructions, restore canal capacity and improve the discharge of stormwater during high-tide conditions.

Particular attention must be given to hospitals, major transport arteries, densely populated residential areas and commercial districts where flooding threatens lives, livelihoods and essential services.

Retention ponds, underground stormwater storage, pumping stations at critical outfalls and improved flood forecasting should form part of the evaluation.

These measures require proper feasibility studies, realistic budgets and clearly assigned institutional responsibilities.

Modern rainfall modelling must also replace assumptions based on historical weather patterns that may no longer adequately reflect the intensity of contemporary extreme-weather events.

There is a further obligation upon the political establishment.

Successive governments have presided over Colombo's urban development while the capacity of its underlying drainage infrastructure has struggled to keep pace. Roads have been widened, buildings have multiplied and natural absorption areas have disappeared.

The consequences of those decisions cannot be erased by changing the occupant of the Mayor's office.

If the Opposition believes that municipal negligence materially worsened the flooding, it should present the evidence. If the Mayor believes the principal cause was infrastructure inadequacy, the Council should publish the engineering data supporting that conclusion.

Both positions deserve examination. Neither should be accepted merely because it suits a political narrative.

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COLOMBO UNDER WATER...

Be that as it may, Colombo's residents are entitled to something considerably more useful than competing accusations.

They deserve a city capable of withstanding foreseeable extreme weather, a municipal administration that maintains its infrastructure and a national political leadership prepared to finance the improvements required.

The Mayor must be accountable for what her administration can reasonably control. Equally, the Opposition must be accountable for the credibility of its accusations and the practicality of its proposed remedies.

When rainfall overwhelms a drainage system by several times its intended capacity, the central question should not be which politician can shout the loudest.

It should be how quickly Sri Lanka can begin building a drainage network capable of protecting its capital.

Because the next storm will not distinguish between Government and Opposition voters. And floodwaters, unlike politicians, are entirely indifferent to who occupies City Hall.

BEYOND THE VIRAL BOAT SHOVE: SRI LANKA FACES MOUNTING CONCERNS OVER UNRULY TOURISTS

A video circulating across social media platforms showing an Israeli tourist shoving a Sri Lankan tour guide off a moving boat and into open water has reignited fierce public debate over tourist conduct, local dignity, and law enforcement oversight.

The footage, originally published by Russian outlet RT, captures a group of young Israelis aboard a leisure boat in Sri Lanka. As the male local guide stands near the edge taking a drink of water, one of the tourists suddenly shoves him from behind, sending him plunging into the sea while the group laughs.

The online fallout was swift, with social media users condemning the act as physical assault and a blatant display of arrogance toward local hospitality workers. Israeli social activist Daniel Amram later published a statement from the tourists involved, who claimed the incident was a harmless, pre-arranged prank.

According to their account, the guide was unhurt, aware of the plan, and participated willingly. Defending their actions, the tourists stated that they were set to enlist in the military shortly and did not deserve public hostility for what they deemed innocent fun.

However, for many in Sri Lanka, the video is not an isolated piece of poor judgment, it is symptomatic of a much broader, systemic friction point.

Over recent months, government authorities have faced mounting pressure over illegal commercial and social activities linked to long-term Israeli visitors, particularly in coastal hubs such as Arugam Bay.

Sri Lankan Cabinet officials and law enforcement have confirmed ongoing investigations into foreign nationals operating unregistered businesses, running unauthorized surf schools, establishing non-compliant community centers, and conducting commercial operations while holding standard tourist visas. These activities circumvent local tax frameworks, take vital income away from domestic business owners, and create isolated enclaves that alienate local residents.



Sri Lanka is hardly alone in facing these challenges. Across global travel hotspots, host communities have voiced identical grievances regarding post-military service tourist groups.

In Thailand's Koh Phangan, local business associations and activists have staged protests and filed formal complaints over unlicensed commercial ventures and public misconduct by Israeli visitors. Similar controversies have erupted in Siargao in the Philippines, where local authorities were forced to intervene following brawls and public friction over unpermitted structures.

While international tourism remains a vital economic pillar for post-recovery Sri Lanka, incidents like the boat video underscore a growing demand for firm enforcement.

Dismissing physical push-backs or economic rule-breaking as harmless youthful pranks overlooks a basic truth: visiting a country is a privilege that requires absolute respect for its laws, its culture, and the people who work to welcome them.



COURT TRANSFERS FROZEN: MEASLES OUTBREAK PROMPTS EMERGENCY VACCINATIONS IN COLOMBO PRISONS

The Department of Prisons has abruptly halted the court production of inmates from three major facilities, the Colombo Remand Prison, the Magazine Remand Prison, and Welikada Prison, after detecting several active cases of measles among detainees.

Prison Media Spokesperson Senaka Pallethanna confirmed that relevant magistrates and High Courts were formally notified in writing, resulting in zero inmate transfers across the capital on November 9.

In response to the sudden cluster, health authorities have initiated an emergency vaccination drive inside the affected compounds to contain further spread.

While prison officials insist the suspension is a routine containment protocol, the sudden emergence of a highly contagious virus inevitably turns attention toward the underlying environment within Sri Lanka's correctional infrastructure. Measles spreads rapidly through respiratory droplets, making closed environments exceptionally vulnerable.

Although official confirmation remains pending on exact transmission chains, medical experts have long pointed out that chronic overcrowding in detention centers creates an ideal incubator for airborne infections.

When cell blocks designed for hundreds end up housing thousands, maintaining basic physical distance becomes practically impossible.

Public health advocates and legal observers frequently speculate that ventilation deficits and sanitation pressures in aging facilities like Welikada amplify outbreaks of this nature.

In crammed wards where air circulation is limited and communal facilities are pushed past capacity, an isolated infection can quickly ripple through the general population.

The decision to freeze court appearances reflects an immediate recognition that moving infected detainees through holding cells, transport vans, and public courtrooms risks exporting the virus directly into the broader judicial system.

Until the vaccination campaign takes hold and medical isolation periods clear, the court suspension will likely cause a temporary backlog in pending trials and bail hearings.

For now, prison authorities are managing a double burden: containing an airborne health hazard within overcrowded walls while preventing the disruption from spilling over into the country's legal halls.

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NATIONAL SECURITY MEETS PERSONAL SCANDAL: THE NVIDIA CRISIS ROCKING THE TECH WORLD

What began as whispers of an executive scandal has rapidly escalated into a full-blown corporate and geopolitical crisis for Nvidia, the world's most powerful semiconductor giant. Over the weekend, Nvidia co-founder and Chief Executive Officer Jensen Huang sent shockwaves through Silicon Valley and Wall Street by issuing a public admission of infidelity, alongside an announcement that Nvidia's board of directors has launched an independent investigation into his conduct.

The controversy erupted after revelations surfaced linking Huang to a close relationship with Alice Huang, also known as Huang Le, a Singapore-based businesswoman and executive connected to data center firm Megaspeed. According to reports, United States intelligence agencies had been tracking her over suspicions of acting on behalf of China's Ministry of State Security. Intelligence surveillance allegedly uncovered communications between Alice Huang and Jensen Huang, raising immediate alarms inside Washington regarding foreign espionage targeting critical American artificial intelligence technology.

In an internal email sent to Nvidia staff on November 8, Huang addressed the situation directly. "I was unfaithful to my wife. My actions hurt her and our children," Huang wrote, offering an unreserved apology to his family, staff, and shareholders while acknowledging that he had broken their trust.

Addressing the espionage allegations, Huang added, "Regarding the national security concerns raised in news reports, the Nvidia Board of Directors has initiated an independent investigation. I support the investigation and will cooperate fully. I love our country and our company. I am committed to protecting Nvidia and supporting America's national security."

Nvidia's board of directors promptly formed a special committee of independent directors, backed by outside legal counsel, to review the matter.

In an official statement, the board emphasized that national security remains paramount, though it noted that there is currently no evidence to suggest that company trade secrets or US national security were compromised. Despite the ongoing inquiry, the board expressed continued operational confidence in Huang, who remains in his role as chief executive.

Wall Street's reaction was swift and punishing. Nvidia stock fell by over four percent in overnight and pre-market trading, wiping out nearly 190 billion dollars in market value. The plunge reflects deep investor anxiety over potential executive disruption at a company that serves as the backbone for the global artificial intelligence boom, supplying critical chips to tech giants such as OpenAI and Meta. The broader tech sector also experienced tremors, amplified by growing market sensitivity around data center capital expenditures and legislative shifts in Washington.

Political fallout in Washington has intensified the pressure. Leaders of the House of Representatives written to Huang, requesting his appearance before congressional committees to explain Nvidia's security protocols and address potential foreign intelligence risks. Lawmakers have emphasized that the intersection of advanced microchip architecture and foreign espionage poses a direct threat to American technological dominance.

Public and industry reaction has ranged from disbelief to intense skepticism. While some analysts view the board's swift investigation as a necessary governance step to protect shareholder interests, market observers warn that an extended probe, combined with congressional hearings, could severely dent investor confidence.

For a company that has driven the global tech rally, Nvidia now finds itself navigating a high-stakes crossroad where personal accountability, corporate governance, and international geopolitics collide.

JUDICIAL SCRUTINY PROMPTS REWRITE: STATE OFFERS AMENDMENTS TO ORGANISED CRIMES BILL

For observers tracking Sri Lanka's legislative process, the latest developments in the Supreme Court come as little surprise. Facing twenty-six separate constitutional challenges, the Attorney General informed the court on November 9 that the government intends to introduce key amendments to the proposed Prevention of Organised Crimes Bill during the parliamentary Committee Stage.

The concession follows intense judicial review by a three-member bench comprising Chief Justice Preethi Padman Surasena, Justice Achala Wengappuli, and Justice Sampath Abeykoon. Since the draft was gazetted on October 6, petitioners including the Bar Association of Sri Lanka have argued that several provisions exceed constitutional bounds, granting overly broad enforcement powers that undermine fundamental rights.

Rather than presenting a tightly framed bill from inception, the executive branch appears to have followed a familiar pattern: publishing expansive draft legislation, allowing legal pushback to culminate in marathon court sessions such as the late-night proceedings on November 4, and ultimately submitting corrective amendments at the eleventh hour.

The document handed to the court effectively acknowledges that aspects of the initial text were legally vulnerable. While introducing amendments during the Committee Stage prevents a direct judicial strikeout, the process highlights recurring gaps in pre-legislative scrutiny. Civil society and legal institutions are once again left to serve as a corrective check against executive overreach.

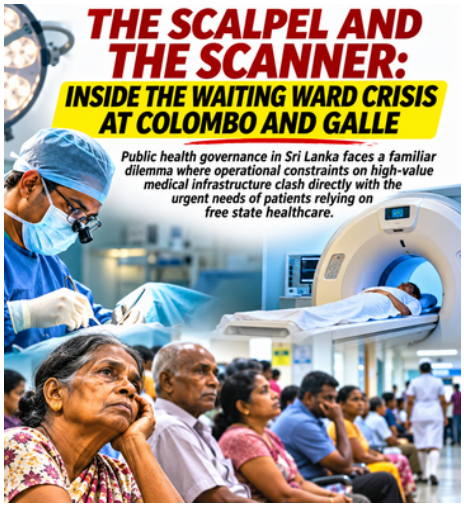
Although the proposed modifications will likely temper the bill's most controversial clauses, the episode underscores a long-standing issue in national policy formulation. Requiring twenty-six petitions and extensive court intervention to align legislation with basic constitutional standards is an inefficient path to governance.

Sound policy requires thorough legal vetting before bills reach the Gazette, rather than reliance on the judiciary to compel necessary revisions.

THE SCALPEL AND THE SCANNER: INSIDE THE WAITING WARD CRISIS AT COLOMBO AND GALLE

Public health governance in Sri Lanka faces a familiar dilemma where operational constraints on high-value medical infrastructure clash directly with the urgent needs of patients relying on free state healthcare.

The debate intensified following public claims by medical specialist Dr. Chamal Sanjeeva, representing a prominent medical association, who alleged that patients admitted to the National Hospital of Sri Lanka in Colombo are enduring forced waits of two to three days for magnetic resonance imaging scans. According to Dr. Sanjeeva, daily scan quotas at certain units within the Colombo facility, as well as the Karapitiya National Hospital in Galle, have been capped at ten to twelve procedures per day.



He argued that this artificial restriction leaves patients in Wards 8, 9, and 10, plus the Neurotrauma and Neurosurgical units, occupying beds for days while planned surgeries are postponed, often driving desperate families to spend over 100,000 rupees at private diagnostic clinics.

While the medical association points to official Ministry of Health directives mandating full utilization of state equipment, hospital administrators and biomedical engineering experts highlight a complex operational picture behind high-tech diagnostic management.

Running multi-million-rupee MRI scanners at continuous maximum capacity presents severe technical and logistical hurdles.

Medical machinery of this caliber, valued at roughly 400 million rupees per unit, relies on specialized

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liquid helium cooling systems, complex software maintenance, and strict daily duty cycles to prevent catastrophic magnet overheating or component breakdown.

Pushing machines beyond calibrated daily thresholds risks prolonged hardware failure, which would collapse diagnostic access entirely for weeks at a time.

Furthermore, state healthcare facilities operate under acute staffing shortages. Conducting high-resolution MRI scans requires qualified radiographers, specialized radiologists for immediate interpretation, and nursing staff for contrast administration and patient monitoring.

Restricting daily throughput is frequently an operational necessity to ensure clinical safety, maintain meticulous reporting standards, and prevent diagnostic burnout among overworked medical staff.

The issue is further complicated by triage protocols. In tertiary referral hubs like Colombo and Galle, emergency trauma cases and acute stroke patients must take immediate precedence over elective inpatient scans. What appears as an administrative delay for ward patients is often the result of clinical prioritization keeping life-threatening cases moving through the scanners.

Ultimately, the MRI bottleneck reflects systemic resource strains rather than simple negligence. Resolving the crisis would require a balanced approach: expanding technical maintenance contracts, recruiting additional diagnostic personnel, and optimizing ward scheduling, so state-funded equipment operates efficiently without compromising safety or overburdening the public healthcare grid.

THE COST OF UNRETURNED ACADEMICS: PARLIAMENT DEMANDS RECOVERY OF UNIVERSITY FUNDS

Parliamentary oversight has once again brought Sri Lanka's higher education system under scrutiny, following a revelation by the Committee on Public Enterprises that state university academics owe nearly 30 billion rupees in defaulted study bonds.

The disclosure came during a COPE session chaired by Parliamentarian Dr. Nishantha Samaraweera to examine the financial performance and audit reports of Eastern University of Sri Lanka for 2023 and 2024.

State-funded universities regularly grant academic staff paid leave and financial backing to pursue doctoral and postgraduate research at international institutions. In return, lecturers sign legal bonds pledging to return and serve the state higher education system for a specified tenure, or reimburse the state for their tuition, allowances, and salaries.

However, systemic non-return has left an enormous financial hole. COPE revealed that across the entire national university network, unrecovered bond defaults have breached 30 billion rupees. The committee instructed the Ministry of Higher Education and university officials to immediately establish a centralized, legal mechanism to trace and recover monies from academics who defaulted on their contracts after settling overseas.

The proceedings surrounding Eastern University offered a window into the administrative weaknesses compounding these losses. Audit reviews revealed that despite receiving nearly 3 billion rupees annually in public funding, the institution lacked a Treasury representative on its Audit and Management Committee.



Auditors flagged glaring conflicts of interest, including a Senior Assistant Internal Auditor managing financial operations while concurrently serving as Chief Internal Auditor.

Additional irregularities included missing personnel files, contradictory qualification certificates used for academic promotions, unapproved study leave, and unrecovered overpayments amounting to millions of rupees. In one notable instance, a lecturer resigned to contest an election, received an overpayment of 3.6 million rupees, and subsequently returned to the staff without settling the balance.

Systemic discipline was also called into question regarding support staff attendance. COPE highlighted that 38 employees bypassed mandatory biometric fingerprint systems to take excessive leave ranging from 5 to 83 days, resulting in over 99 million rupees in unrecovered salaries. Rejecting administrative attempts to attribute missing records to historic conflicts, tsunamis, and regional floods, COPE urged immediate legislative amendments to the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978 to grant the University Grants Commission direct powers to intervene in university council mismanagement.

While lawmakers view the defaulted billions as unpunished financial breach, higher education analysts point out that the bond crisis is fundamentally tied to the nation's severe economic contraction and ongoing brain drain. Decreased academic remuneration, soaring living costs, and limited research funding have driven thousands of professionals to seek permanent foreign appointments. When faced with lucrative overseas careers versus returning to underfunded domestic faculties, many scholars choose to break their agreements, knowing that international recovery mechanisms remain legally sluggish and poorly enforced.

Resolving the 30-billion-rupee deficit requires more than rhetoric. To safeguard public funds without choking off academic development, the state must pair aggressive legal recovery frameworks with structural incentives that make returning to Sri Lankan universities a viable and rewarding career path for global talent.

RUSSELL BRAND RECEIVES TEN YEARS FOR RAPE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

Disgraced comedian and media figure Russell Brand has been sentenced to ten years and six months in prison following his conviction at London's Southwark Crown Court for rape and three counts of sexual assault.

Handing down the ruling on November 9, 2026, High Court Judge Mr. Justice Joel Bennathan characterized the 51-year-old performer as a "ruthless and manipulative sexual predator" who displayed staggering arrogance throughout the four-week trial. The sentence comes after a jury found Brand guilty of raping a 21-year-old fan at his home in 2009, alongside three counts of sexual assault against separate women in environments ranging from a bar and a radio station to a television studio between 2004 and 2009. He was acquitted of two other rape allegations and an attempted indecent assault count.

The sentencing hearing opened with harrowing testimony. The court heard an impact statement read on behalf of the victim of the 2009 rape, who detailed the enduring psychological toll of the attack and described carrying the trauma with her daily.

She recounted how Brand's global celebrity and influence convinced her at the time that law enforcement would never believe her allegations against a major entertainment figure.

Defense counsel attempted to mitigate the penalty by arguing that Brand is a fundamentally reformed individual who has lived without incident for over a decade, describing the 2009 conviction as a momentary failure to respect consent.

However, Justice Bennathan rejected claims that Brand's subsequent pivot toward wellness commentary, political podcasting, and a public 2024 Christian baptism erased his past conduct, reducing the baseline penalty by just one year for character mitigating factors before locking in the ten-and-a-half-year term.

Under UK sentencing guidelines for serious sexual offenses, Brand will be required to serve at least two-thirds of his sentence in custody before becoming eligible for parole consideration. Metropolitan Police authorities also confirmed following the sentencing that Brand remains under ongoing investigation regarding two additional rape complaints.

For a figure who transformed his career from an irreverent MTV presenter into an esteemed political pundit and right-wing media icon, the Southwark judgment represents a definitive collapse.

The court's ruling confirms what critics long alleged: that beneath the loquacious charm and rock-and-roll persona lay an unpunished pattern of predatory behavior that state justice has finally caught up with.

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MANAGING THE RIVERS BEFORE THEY FLOOD OUR HOMES: IS SRI LANKA MISSING A VITAL AUTHORITY?

Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia have developed integrated river-basin management systems. Sri Lanka has the institutions and expertise, but does it have the coordination and authority needed to prevent recurring downstream disasters?

Every time heavy rain descends upon Sri Lanka, a familiar sequence unfolds. Rivers rise, canals overflow, roads disappear beneath muddy water, homes are inundated and thousands of families confront another avoidable disruption to their lives. Officials inspect the damage, emergency committees assemble, and assurances are offered that corrective action will follow.

Then the waters recede. So, frequently, does the urgency.

The flooding that paralysed parts of Colombo on November 6 provides another opportunity to examine a question extending far beyond blocked municipal drains. Does Sri Lanka possess an effective national mechanism to manage its rivers, catchments, reservoirs and downstream floodplains as interconnected systems?

The answer is more complicated than a simple yes or no.
Sri Lanka has an Irrigation Department, a Mahaweli Authority, a Disaster Management Centre and several other institutions responsible for different aspects of water management. Indeed, the Irrigation Department established a dedicated Riverine Management Sub Department in January 2018, with responsibilities including river-basin conservation, flood behaviour studies, erosion control and coordination among stakeholders.

Its Hydrology and Disaster Management Division also monitors river levels and issues flood warnings.

The problem, therefore, is not the complete absence of institutional machinery. It is whether that machinery possesses sufficient authority, resources and coordination to manage flooding before it becomes a disaster.

WHAT OUR NEIGHBOURS ARE DOING

Thailand offers an instructive comparison. Under its Water Resources Act of 2018, the country established a national framework incorporating the Office of National Water Resources and 22 river-basin committees.

These committees bring water management closer to the geographical realities of individual river systems. Their responsibilities encompass planning, coordination, monitoring and the competing demands of water users.

Malaysia operates through its Department of Irrigation and Drainage, which has adopted Integrated River Basin Management as a central principle of flood control.

Rather than treating flooding exclusively as an emergency requiring drainage improvements, Malaysia incorporates

river rehabilitation, catchment management, flood forecasting and development controls into its approach.

Its National Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre provides real-time hydrological information and aims to deliver advance warnings of monsoon flooding, where forecasting models are available.

Indonesia employs specialised river-basin organisations, known as Balai Wilayah Sungai and Balai Besar Wilayah Sungai. These organisations undertake planning, infrastructure development, maintenance and water-resource management within defined river territories.

None of these countries has conquered flooding. Thailand and Indonesia continue to experience devastating inundations, while Malaysia regularly confronts monsoon-related disasters.

Nevertheless, their institutional arrangements recognise an important principle: a river cannot be managed effectively by treating each administrative district through which it flows as an independent problem.

WHY DOWNSTREAM COMMUNITIES SUFFER

Consider the Kelani River, whose catchment extends from the central highlands towards the heavily populated western lowlands.

Rainfall in upstream catchments, changes in land use, sediment accumulation, floodplain development and conditions near the river's outlet can combine to determine how much water eventually reaches downstream communities.

Deforestation and poorly managed development can accelerate runoff. Encroachment upon wetlands removes natural water-storage capacity. Obstructed waterways can aggravate local flooding, while high downstream water levels can prevent drainage systems from discharging efficiently.

Reservoir operations may also influence river flows, although their effects depend on storage capacity, operating rules, rainfall patterns and the characteristics of each catchment.

These processes do not respect municipal or provincial boundaries.

A drainage improvement in one locality cannot necessarily compensate for the loss of upstream flood-storage capacity. Nor can clearing an urban canal resolve every problem associated with an overflowing river.

Equally, Colombo's recent flash flooding demonstrates why river management and urban stormwater management must operate together.

Authorities reported approximately 129 millimetres of rainfall during the November 6 event, while officials indicated that parts of the city's drainage infrastructure were designed for substantially lower hourly rainfall intensities.

Subsequent inspections identified 60 locations where drainage obstructions required attention.

The lesson is not that every flood could have been prevented. Exceptional rainfall can overwhelm even well-maintained infrastructure.

The lesson is that preparedness must reflect both changing rainfall risks and the physical condition of the entire drainage network.

SRI LANKA ALREADY HAS A STARTING POINT

There is an encouraging development that deserves greater public attention.

In June 2025, Cabinet approved the preparation of a watershed management plan for the Kelani River Basin during 2025 and 2026, allocating Rs. 250 million through the Clean Sri Lanka programme.

The proposal recognised catchment degradation, sedimentation, sand mining, urbanisation, changing land use and pollution as significant concerns.

This is precisely the integrated thinking Sri Lanka requires. But an approved plan is not the same as an operational flood-management system. The public deserves to know how much of that work has been completed, what interventions have been prioritised and when measurable benefits can reasonably be expected.

A PRACTICAL WAY FORWARD

Rather than immediately creating another expensive bureaucracy, the Government could establish a National River Basin Management Framework, initially strengthening the Irrigation Department's existing riverine-management capabilities.

Dedicated basin-management units could be established for the Kelani, Kalu, Gin, Nilwala and other flood-prone river systems, with clearly defined responsibilities and enforceable coordination arrangements.

Each basin should have an integrated flood-risk map, a publicly accessible monitoring system and an agreed operational plan connecting upstream rainfall observations, reservoir management, river-level forecasting and downstream emergency responses.

Land-use decisions affecting floodplains and wetlands should undergo mandatory flood-risk assessment. Existing drainage channels should be systematically surveyed, with maintenance schedules and responsible agencies publicly identified.

A national digital platform could combine rainfall measurements, river gauges, reservoir levels and predictive modelling to provide communities with earlier and more precise warnings.

Most importantly, Parliament should require annual reporting on flood-risk reduction, infrastructure maintenance, expenditure and outcomes.
The objective should be measurable protection, not merely additional administrative structures.

WATER DOES NOT RECOGNISE POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

There is an important distinction between responding to floods and managing the conditions that make flooding destructive.

Emergency operations save lives. Drain clearance restores essential infrastructure. Both are indispensable.

But neither substitutes for sustained management of the rivers, catchments, wetlands and floodplains upon which millions of Sri Lankans depend.
Be that as it may, the country need not begin from nothing. It already possesses considerable technical expertise, established institutions and the beginnings of a river-basin management framework.

What remains is to bring these capabilities together under clear responsibility, adequate financing and transparent public accountability.

Sri Lanka cannot stop the rain. But it can become considerably better at managing where the water goes, how quickly it gets there and how many families suffer when it arrives.

That is the difference between accepting flooding as an annual misfortune and treating flood protection as a permanent responsibility of the State.

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WATER MANAGEMENT IN SRI LANKA –

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