

## INTRODUCTION

Cyclone Ditwah made landfall in Sri Lanka on 28 November 2025, bringing torrential rainfall to Badulla District and triggering widespread flooding and landslides across its mountainous terrain. Within hours, rivers overflowed and steep slopes collapsed. National reporting in December 2025 indicated that hundreds of homes in Badulla were wiped out by floods and landslides. Infrastructure damage was reported to be severe, particularly in hill-country areas where the collapse of roads and bridges isolated communities and caused significant access constraints.<sup>1</sup>

As of 20 February 2026, DMC reported 17 open and operational formal safety centres in Badulla District hosting 1,777 individuals, alongside a total of 27,523 persons displaced, inclusive of those residing with host families. Badulla ranked as the third most affected district nationally in terms of displacement, following Kegalle and Nuwara Eliya.<sup>2</sup> United Nations reporting further indicated that the majority of displaced persons in Badulla District were residing outside formal safety centres and remained unable to return to their areas of origin due to severe housing damage, continued landslide risk, and the need for relocation of households situated within designated high-risk zones. Housing damage was reported to be widespread, with temporary camps

established in parts of the district and indications of informal and dispersed displacement arrangements emerging alongside formal sites.<sup>3</sup>

Heavy rainfall persisted into January 2026, sustaining elevated landslide risk across the district, with red warnings extended in Passara, Lunugala, Welimada and other high-risk DS Divisions.<sup>4</sup> Media reporting further indicated that entire hamlets were buried and that households dependent on land-based livelihoods, particularly within the tea plantation sector, experienced significant disruption, prompting consideration of alternative or shifted livelihood strategies in affected areas.<sup>5</sup>

While district-level displacement figures and situation updates were available in the immediate aftermath, systematic analysis at DS Division level had not been comprehensively captured. However, return planning, relocation programming, and recovery prioritisation require disaggregated evidence at sub-district level. In this context, a DS Division-level assessment was undertaken to generate granular evidence on displacement trends, return dynamics, persisting sectoral needs, and structural constraints affecting safe return and recovery across Badulla District.

## KEY FINDINGS

**130,253 individuals**

were displaced during the initial phase of the cyclone.

**60%** of displacement is localized in five DS Divisions: Passara, Soranathota, Mahiyanganaya, Welimada, and Lunugala.

**71%** of IDPs had returned by mid-February 2026

**38,133 IDPs**

remained displaced as of mid February.

**80%** of KIs indicated that homes were only partially habitable.

### MOST FREQUENTLY CITED NEEDS BY KIs

- 89% - Planned relocation support
- 76% - Livelihood support (tools, seeds, equipment)
- 73% - Cash or financial assistance
- 49% - Landslide risk information
- 33% - Shelter repair and construction materials

### BARRIERS TO RETURN REPORTED BY KIs

- 82% - Housing destroyed or uninhabitable
- 62% - Partially damaged housing requiring repairs
- 42% - Fear, trauma or psychological reasons
- 40% - Landslide or flood risk

1 UNDP, *Mapping the Initial Impact of Cyclone Ditwah in Sri Lanka, 2025* (available [here](#))

2 Disaster Management Centre, *Situation Report on 2026.02.20 at 10.00 hrs, 20 February 2026*, (available [here](#))

3 United Nations in Sri Lanka, *Cyclone Ditwah: Situation Report, 23 January 2026*, (available [here](#))

4 Newswire, *Landslide warnings issued to four districts, 06 January 2026*, (available [here](#))

5 Al Jazeera, *'Like wastelands': Sri Lanka tea plantations suffer Cyclone Ditwah's wrath, 10 December 2025*, (available [here](#))

## DISPLACEMENT & RETURN TRENDS

Displacement caused by Cyclone Ditwah in Badulla District was highly localised, with fewer than 1 per cent of affected individuals (713 people) estimated to have moved across DS Divisions. Most displaced people remained within their division of origin, indicating minimal cross-division movement. Key informants (KIs) estimated that approximately 130,253 individuals were displaced during the initial phase of the cyclone. Five DS Divisions, Passara, Soranathota, Mahiyanganaya, Welimada, and Lunugala, accounted for around 60 per cent of all displacement.

By mid-February 2026, an estimated 71 per cent of displaced individuals had returned, leaving roughly 38,133 people still displaced. Return patterns varied widely between divisions, with notably lower return rates in Lunugala (42%), Passara (47%), and Welimada (52%). Passara reported the highest number of individuals yet to return (10,000), followed by Lunugala (7,550) and Welimada (7,500).

Reports of multiple displacement were minimal (2%), suggesting that secondary displacement was not a widespread issue across the district. Where it did occur, it was largely concentrated in Passara, which accounted for 78 per cent of such cases. Permanent relocation was reported for fewer than 1 per cent of IDPs, primarily in Passara (1,000 individuals), Badulla DS Division (119), and Lunugala (70).

In contrast to other districts, anticipated future displacement were reported by 8 per cent of KIs, particularly in Welimanda (3,300 individuals), Passara (2,367), Badulla (1,225), Lunugala (1,075) and Kandeketiya (1,000).



Passara DS Division Badulla District © IOM February 2026

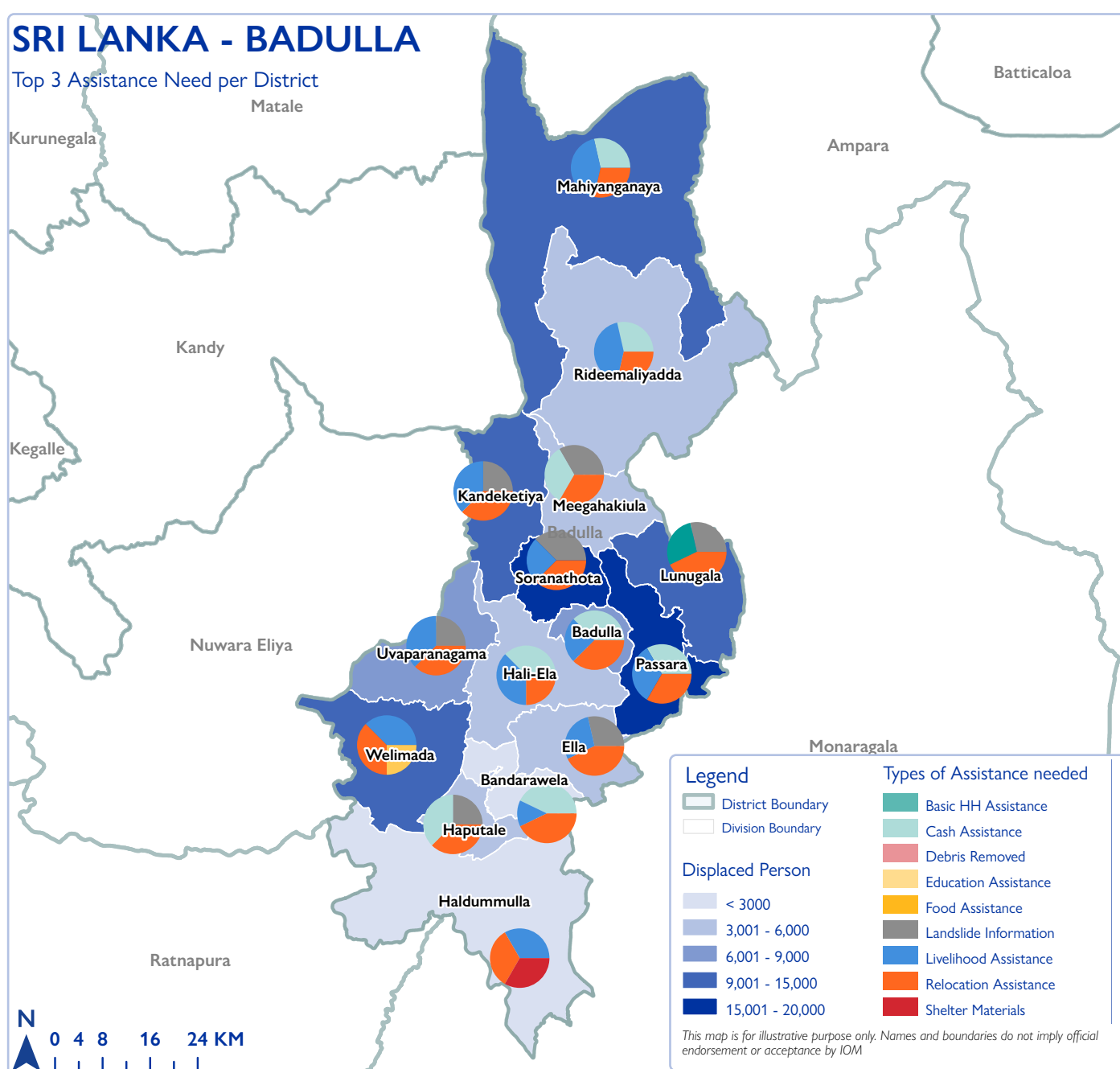
DS Division	Average number of individuals displaced due to Ditwah	Individuals displaced to another DS Division	"Estimated per cent of IDPs that have returned as of 19 February 2026"	Approximate Number of People Commuting	Number of IDPs displaced multiple times	Number of people relocated permanently	People anticipated to displace in the coming months
Passara	18,750	0	47%	1,867	2,000	1,000	2,367
Soranathota	15,780	80	86%	0	0	8	100
Mahiyanganaya	15,000	0	91%	0	0	0	0
Welimada	15,000	500	50%	150	275	0	3,000
Lunugala	13,050	50	42%	150	180	70	1,075
Kandeketiya	9,200	0	78%	0	0	0	1,000
Badulla	8,175	0	84%	0	0	119	1,225
Uvapanagama	7,408	8	74%	500	0	6	0
Rideemaliyadda	5,750	0	89%	0	0	0	750
Meegahakiula	5,575	75	70%	163	175	30	110
Ella	5,500	0	95%	0	0	5	600
Hali-Ela	4,915	0	84%	500	0	0	20
Haputale	3,400	0	88%	100	89	0	233
Bandarawela	1,750	0	97%	0	0	10	0
Haldummulla	1,000	0	60%	0	0	0	0

## PRIORITY NEEDS

The most frequently cited needs were planned relocation support (89%), livelihood support (tools, seeds, equipment) (76%), cash or financial assistance (73%), and landslide risk information (49%). Other smaller but notable needs included shelter repair, materials and construction materials (33%), NBRI reports (20%), protection services (20%), and livelihood support (counseling, market linkages) (18%). These priorities reflect a population seeking stable return conditions, structural repair, risk clarity, protection services and livelihood restoration rather than emergency aid.

DISTRICT WIDE PRIORITY NEEDS	
89%	Planned relocation support
76%	Livelihood support (tools, seeds, equipment)
73%	Cash or financial assistance
49%	Landslide risk information
33%	Shelter repair materials / construction materials
20%	Protection services (legal aid, documentation, psychosocial support)
20%	NBRI Report
10%	Livelihood support (counseling, market linkages)

Map 1. Top 3 Assistance Needs per DS Division in Badulla District



## BARRIERS TO RETURN

Barriers to return in Badulla are strongly housing-centred and linked to future risks, including housing destroyed or uninhabitable (82%), partially damaged housing requiring repairs (62%), fear, trauma or psychological reasons (42%), and landslide or flood risk (40%). Secondary barriers included a lack of information about landslides and NBRI clearances (38%), road access constraints (20%), a lack of livelihood opportunities, financial resources and assistance (18% each). In contrast to districts where financial constraints are the primary challenge, Badulla's situation is shaped by extensive physical damage, concerns over structural stability and fear, trauma, or psychological barriers to return, issues closely tied to its landslide-prone landscape.

MAIN BARRIERS TO RETURN	
82%	Housing destroyed or uninhabitable
62%	Partially damaged housing requiring repairs
42%	Fear, trauma or psychological reasons
40%	Landslide or flood risk
38%	Lack of information about landslides and no NBRI clearance
20%	Road access constraints Land / property disputes
18%	Lack of livelihood opportunities
18%	Lack of financial resources and assistance

## SHELTER DAMAGE AND ACCESS TO SERVICES

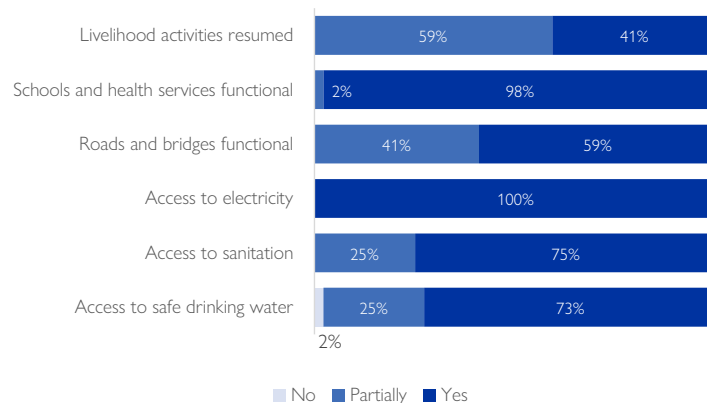
Housing damage continued to be a major limiting factor in Badulla. Only 20 per cent of KIs reported that displaced households could fully occupy their original homes, while the vast majority (80%) indicated that homes were only partially habitable. This corresponds with the district's relatively modest return rate (71%) and the concentration of long-term displacement in landslide-affected areas.


Access to services had largely stabilised but remained uneven. Electricity had been fully restored, with all (100%) KIs confirming access. Most schools (98%) and health facilities were functioning across the district, though 33 per cent of KIs in Passara noted only partial functionality.

Access to safe drinking water was more inconsistent: all KIs in Passara and Kandeketiya reported only partial access, and 33 per cent in Lunugala reported no access at all. Significant gaps also remained in sanitation, with 25 per cent of KIs reporting only partial access, including 67 per cent in Passara and Kandeketiya.


Roads and bridges were only partially usable, with 59 per cent described as fully functional and 41 per cent as only partially functional. All KIs in Lunugala and Kandeketiya reported partial access. Livelihood recovery was also slow, with fewer than half (41%) of KIs stating that livelihood activities had fully resumed, compared to 59 per cent reporting only partial recovery. Overall, while essential public services had largely been restored, gaps persisted in housing habitability, sanitation, road access, and livelihood recovery across several divisions.

Figure 1. Access to services in Badulla District







**98%**  
OF KIS NOTED THAT SCHOOLS AND HEALTH SERVICES ARE FUNCTIONING




**59%**  
OF KIS NOTED THAT BRIDGES AND ROADS ARE FUNCTIONAL




**100%**  
OF KIS REPORTED ACCESS TO ELECTRICITY



**75%**  
OF KIS REPORTED ACCESS TO SANITATION FACILITIES (LATRINES/TOILETS)



**73%**  
OF KIS REPORTED THERE IS ACCESS TO SAFE DRINKING WATER



**41%**  
OF KIS NOTED THAT LIVELIHOOD ACTIVITIES HAVE RESUMED

### COMMUTING AND PARTIAL RETURNS

A distinctive aspect of displacement in Badulla was the prevalence of daytime commuting, which points to phased or partial return dynamics. An estimated 3,429 individuals (3 per cent of all IDPs) were reported to travel between their place of displacement and areas of origin during the day. This behaviour was most prominent among IDPs in Hali-Ela (65%), followed by Uvaparanagama (26%), Haputale (25%), Passara (19%), Meegahakiula (10%), Lunugala (2%) and Welimada (2%).

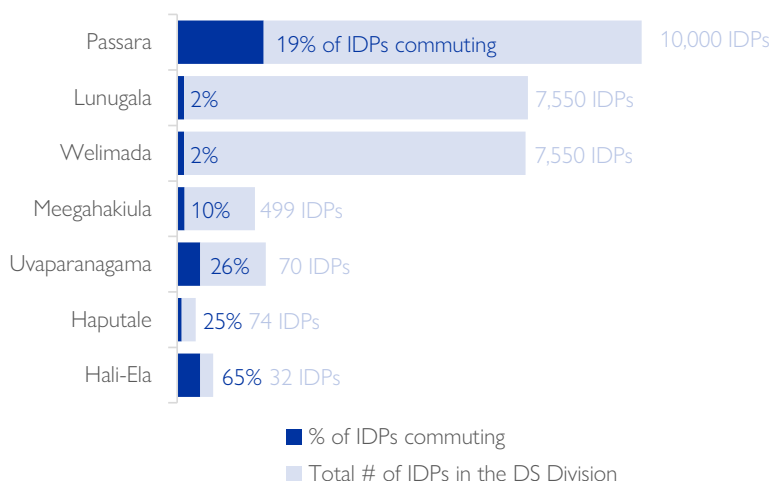
These patterns suggest that although many households continue to stay away from their homes overnight, they have resumed livelihoods, services, or other daily activities in their original communities. This indicates a process of partial reintegration rather than full return.

Divisions reporting higher levels of multiple displacement and daytime commuting were also those where formal safety centres remained operational during the data collection period. This suggests that continued reliance on formal displacement sites is associated with more fluid movement patterns, including phased or partial return.

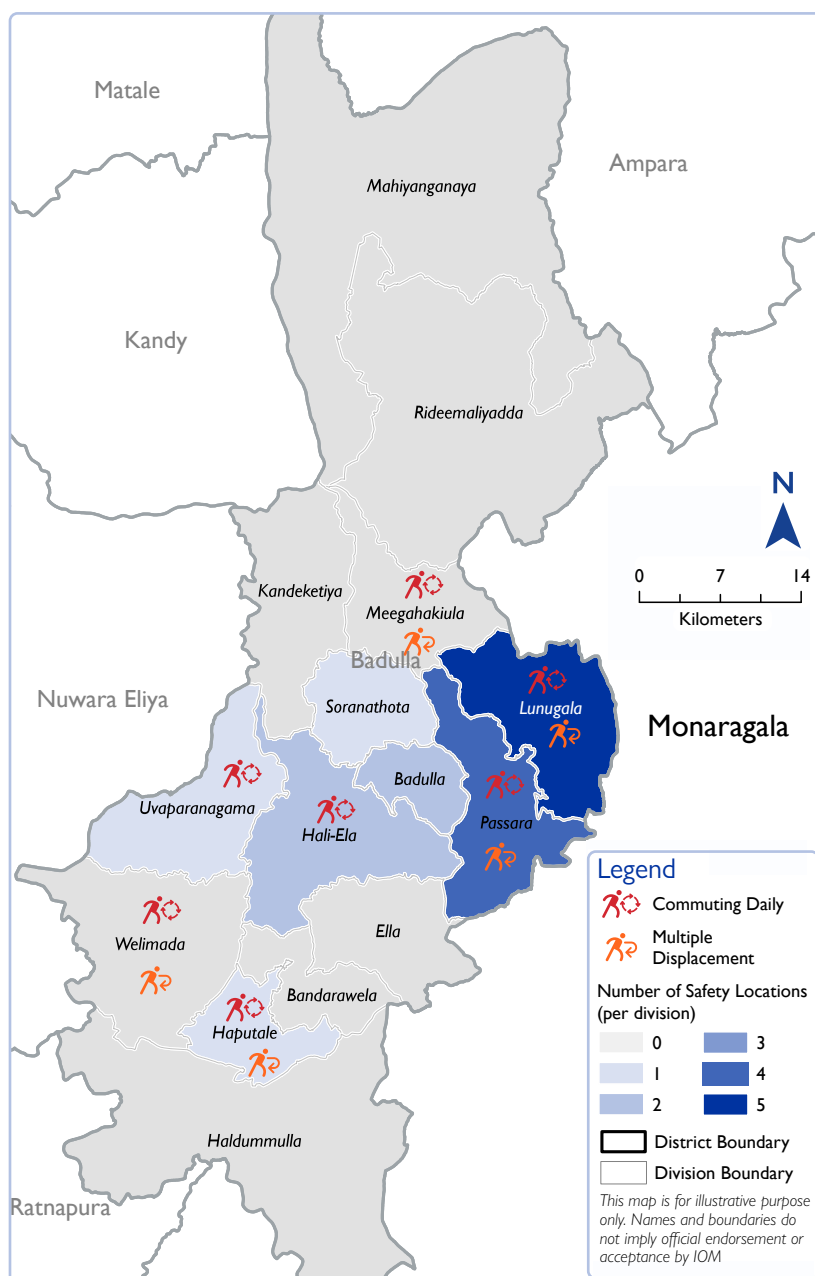
The presence of safety centres appears to function not only as a temporary shelter arrangement but also as a buffer mechanism for households navigating uncertainty around housing safety and landslide risk classification. In these contexts, households were reported to maintain overnight residence in displacement while resuming livelihood activities, schooling, or property monitoring in areas of origin during daytime hours. This pattern reflects transitional return dynamics rather than stable reintegration.

At the same time, this pattern points to continued exposure and potentially harmful coping linked to livelihood necessity. In several instances, areas marked as high risk or not formally cleared by NBRI continued to be accessed during daytime hours. This dynamic increases vulnerability by sustaining movement into hazard-prone zones while households remain formally displaced, effectively prolonging a condition of incomplete reallocation or protracted displacement.

Figure 2. % of IDPs commuting and total # of IDPs by DS Division



Map 1. Number of Safety Centres Locations per DS Division in Badulla District



## COMMUTING AND PARTIAL RETURNS: CASE STUDY IN LUNUGALA DS DIVISION

Lunugala, the division with the highest number of operational safety centres in Badulla District, illustrates this dynamic. Approximately 150 families were reported to commute daily from collective shelters to plantation estates where they previously resided and worked.

During the assessment period, these households were transferred from Madolsima Tamil School safety centre, operating under a hybrid school safety centre model, to Galilla Tamil School safety centre to facilitate the conduct of government examinations.

While shelter arrangements shifted, commuting patterns continued. From Madolsima, households travelled approximately 4 km to plantation sites, with transportation reportedly provided by estate management. Following relocation to Galilla, the commuting distance reduced to approximately 0.5 km, with households walking to work. These plantation areas have been marked by NBRI as high-risk zones.

Reportedly, precautionary behaviour was primarily exercised during rainfall events, while plantation activities otherwise continued. This case underscores the absence of a sustainable displacement pathway for this caseload. Households remain formally displaced in collective shelters while resuming livelihoods in designated high-risk areas, highlighting a condition of sustained and partial displacement rather than stable return or planned relocation.



Haliela DS Division Badulla District © IOM February 2026

## QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS: DISPLACEMENT EXPERIENCE

Qualitative interviews conducted across multiple DS Divisions in Badulla indicate that displacement during Ditwah was hazard-specific and context-dependent, with both flood-driven and landslide-driven dynamics observed. In low-lying flood-affected areas, displacement occurred rapidly and with little warning, requiring night-time rescue.

*“The water broke the gate and rose nearly 8 feet and quickly filled the ground floor [...] tried to call the Disaster Management Center in Badulla, but could not reach them. Finally, Sri Lanka Navy soldiers rescued us at midnight” – Badulla DS Division.*

In mountainous divisions, displacement was largely precautionary, triggered by sustained rainfall, slope instability, and prior risk classification, albeit accompanied by sustained attempts to return or at least verify potential safety upon return, through the length of displacement

*“Following the landslide that occurred on 4 November, Morakatiya and Helgedara villages in Nikapotha Grama Niladhari (GN) area, had been identified as high-risk zones by the NBRI. Residents were advised by GN officer not to stay in those areas during ditwah cyclone period as well. However, some residents who own cultivation land in Morakatiya and Helgedara area, continue to access their land during the daytime for farming activities and then return to their current displacement place during the ditwah cyclone time period as well.” – Haldummulla Division.*

The duration of displacement varied significantly, ranging from approximately one week in flood-affected Badulla DS Division to around one month in Passara division, and extending beyond two to three months in high-risk landslide settings where relocation processes remained ongoing.

## CHALLENGES IN RETURN & CONTINUED DISPLACEMENT

Across contexts, decisions to return were shaped by improving weather conditions, the closure of safety centres, overcrowding in host locations, positive NBRI assessments, and perceived safety of the home environment. In some instances, return was described as a constrained rather than voluntary choice. Return and continued displacement were strongly influenced by official hazard verification.

*"The area is mountainous... the risk of future landslides remains high [...] (return decisions depend on) an accurate NBRI assessment." – Hali-Ela DS division.* At the time of interview, no active movement restrictions were reported, although temporary restrictions had been imposed during the acute phase in high-risk zones. *"It took*

*more than one and half month to clean the full house" – Badulla DS Division.*

Post-return challenges were associated with recovery burdens, administrative processes, and psychosocial strain. In flood-affected settings, prolonged cleaning and rehabilitation were required. Administrative barriers were also highlighted, particularly in relation to damage recording and relief access.

*"Government relief for house damages, I faced difficulties with the GN officer, as the officer had not recorded the damage inside the house. [...] I had to visit the GN office several times before finally receiving the relief money"*

*– Kandekatiya DS division.*

## LIVELIHOODS & HOUSING RECOVERY ON RETURN

Livelihood impacts were concentrated in land-based sectors. In Hali-Ela, it was reported that "Approximately 5 acres of pepper cultivation were damaged due to the landslide and heavy rainfall." In Passara, tea plantation losses were also reported at division level, with some households shifting to labour work following plantation damage. In Kandekatiya, livestock losses were described in specific GN pockets: *"I heard from some villagers that the (Kandakeepoo) Ulpotha area was affected and some animals (Cattle farm) died"*.

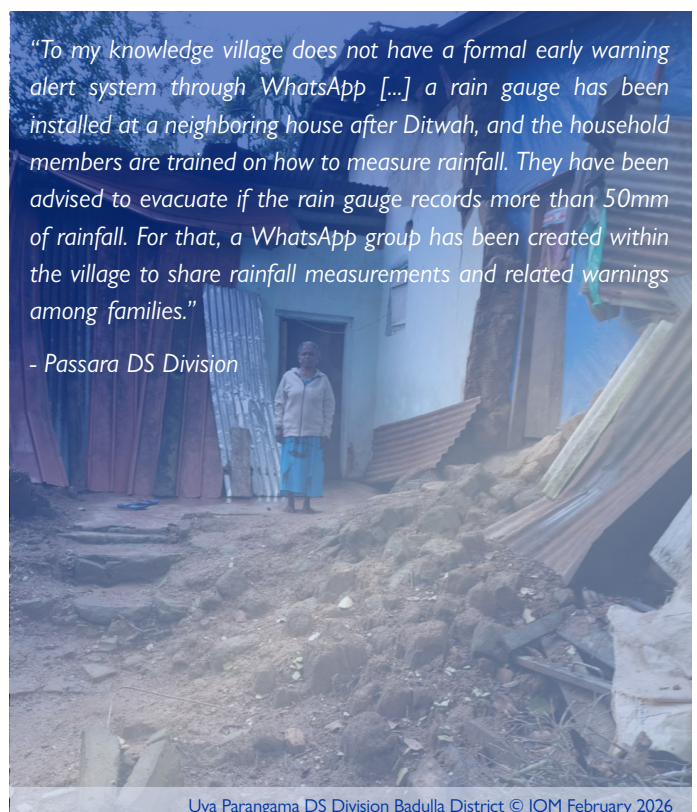
Outside of these areas, small-scale cultivation and wage labour were described as largely resumed at the time of interview. Across contexts, a consistent theme was the coexistence of normalisation and heightened vigilance. While essential services had largely stabilised and most households had resumed daily routines, fear during heavy rainfall remained pronounced, particularly in mountainous and previously high-risk areas.

## ACCESS TO SERVICES & INFORMATION

Water supply across divisions was described as restored and functional, although in some areas no post-disaster water quality testing had reportedly been conducted. Education, disrupted during the first month following Ditwah, had resumed by mid-January, with some cash support reportedly provided for school materials. Legal documentation impacts were uneven. In Badulla DS Division, *"about 40 families were affected by the flood so most of their legal documents were destroyed"*, while other divisions reported limited or isolated cases of document loss. Replacement procedures were generally routed through Access to structured and reliable information during displacement was limited. The GN and Divisional Secretariat offices.

In Passara, a community-based rainfall monitoring mechanism had been introduced following Ditwah. However, this approach was not reported to extend to neighbouring villages.

Information access during displacement was primarily mediated through GN Officers and Development Officers rather than formalised communication systems. Across DS divisions, all interviewees indicated that they were not members of government- or DMC-run WhatsApp alert groups and were uncertain whether such systems existed. One respondent in Mahiyanganya DS Division stated, *"I am not a member and not aware of existence of such groups.... Since I also have a smart phone I can also join to group if they allowed me to join."* Another respondent in Hali-Ela DS Division reported that *"there was no formally established system for receiving information. When information is needed, community members usually contact the GN Officer and the Development Officer (DO), who then provide the necessary updates."*



## LONG-TERM NEEDS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Findings indicate a shift in Badulla District from immediate emergency response toward risk-informed recovery; however, displacement levels remained comparatively high, with a substantial proportion of affected populations still unable to return.

Durable return continued to depend on timely NBRI risk assessments and clear communication of hazard classification, particularly in high-risk landslide zones. Housing rehabilitation and planned relocation support remained critical given the high proportion of partially habitable homes.

Livelihood recovery in land-based sectors, including tea cultivation, smallholder farming, and livestock, required sustained assistance. Strengthened early warning systems and improved administrative processes for damage verification and relief access are also necessary.

While essential services had largely stabilised, safe and sustainable return remained contingent on housing repair, risk clarity, and economic recovery at DS Division level.



Walimada DS Division Badulla District © IOM February 2026

## METHODOLOGY

The assessment used a mixed method design including both Quantitative and Qualitative components.

**Quantitative Component (DS-Level, Admin 3):** (DS-level / Admin 3): Three subject matter experts were interviewed in each of the 15 DS Divisions (45 interviews). These key informant interviews (KII) were conducted between 16 - 19 February 2026. The tool generated DS-specific estimates of displaced populations, returnees, cross DS movement, key needs and conditions affecting return. KIs included, CBOs, community leaders, NGO-CSOs, Government officials, IDPs and returnees among others.

**Qualitative Component (District Level Admin 2):** Six semi structured interviews were conducted between 15 - 20 February 2026 with displaced persons and returnees (or close contacts) to explore movement history, shelter conditions, livelihoods, service access, and protection concerns.

Triangulation across multiple KIs per DS Division was used to reduce reliance on single viewpoints, particularly where displacement occurred outside formal centres. While suitable for rapid estimation, findings remain sensitive to definitional interpretation and estimation bias.

**Contrasting quantitative and qualitative perspectives:** The qualitative dataset draws on three interviews with IDPs and three interviews with returnees, while the quantitative component is based on KI estimates across all 15 DS Divisions. Quantitative findings provide divisional-level estimates on displacement scale, return rates, service access, and priority needs, highlighting where impacts are concentrated. Qualitative insights contextualise these trends by explaining how hazard exposure, risk classification, housing damage, and administrative processes shape return decisions and recovery pathways. Read together, they offer both the scale and the underlying drivers of displacement and return dynamics in Badulla District.

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