



**NAPM**

*30 years journey of struggle, solidarity and building alternatives*

## **National Alliance of People's Movements**

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**Painful Loss of Hundreds of lives in Kerala Landslides: ‘An Avertable Disaster’?**

**Safeguard Eco-Sensitive Western Ghats from Reckless & Destructive Activities!**

**Hold Union & State Govts accountable for ruining ‘ecology’ & people’s lives!**

**31<sup>st</sup> July, 2024: National Alliance of People’s Movements (NAPM) is deeply pained at the tragic death of hundreds of people in the landslides of Kerala, over the past two days. The numbers of both the dead and those missing seem to be constantly increasing, with local media reporting at least 250 people dead and 225 missing, as of now. We express our heartfelt condolences to the families of all the deceased and convey strength to people of the state in this moment of immense grief. We also hope that the hundreds of people injured and trapped in the debris are provided all possible aid and assistance. We appeal to all our comrades and people’s organizations in Kerala and nearby states to support the valiant rescue and relief operations underway, by the disaster relief teams and the state government.**

As has been reported, the colossal loss of life and injuries have been in the aftermath of the cloudburst, heavy rains and landslides in the Mundakkai and Chooralmalai regions in Wayanad district of Kerala. The state witnessed many tragic deaths due to landslides in 2018 and 2019, as well. Even as immediate relief is significant, this incident should not be passed off as ‘yet another natural disaster’! While broader climatic conditions like warming of the Arabian sea has a key role to play in the changing rainfall patterns, leading to landslides, there are other human-induced or rather state-enabled actions like rampant deforestation and reckless construction that has accentuated the crisis. It is high time the underlying causes of these repeated landslides are officially acknowledged and necessary course-correction ensured, at the highest levels.

Environmentalists from Kerala have pointed out that Mundakkai has a history of many landslides and infact is part of what is known as the ‘Camel Hump’ mountain range. It is important to highlight that four years back, a high-level committee constituted by the Kerala State Disaster Management Authority (KSDMA) forewarned of landslides in the eastern slopes of the Western Ghats in Wayanad and recommended that 4,000 families be immediately shifted. It is a matter of extreme concern that the recommendations of this Committee were ignored, in a way, paving the way for the current tragedy. The proposed construction of a 2,000-crore mega tunnel project, barely 2 kms away from the current landslide in Mundakkai is likely to cause more such mishaps in the future.

The repeated disasters occurring in the highly ecologically sensitive Western Ghats has been a matter of acute concern for all people’s movements and ecologists. The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP), headed by Prof. Madhav Gadgil, in its Report submitted to Union Environment Ministry way back in 2011 highlighted the need for restraint in construction

activities and infact marked the current affected areas under 'Ecologically Sensitive Zone (ESZ)-1'. The Panel proposed that quarrying and red category industries should not be allowed in ESZ- I.

The Kerala Govt. should have diligently implemented the WGEEP Report and not allowed change in land use from forest to non-forest and agricultural to non-agricultural purposes. However, it has been pointed out that in violation of the Gadgil Committee recommendations, the Kerala Govt. permitted quarrying within a distance of 50 metres from human settlements, as against the Committee stipulation of 100 mts. The Reports by the Kerala Legislature after the 2018 disaster and the Post-Disaster Needs Assessment Report prepared by multilateral agencies including the United Nations, also clearly warned of adverse impacts due to interventions like roads and other constructions, mining and deforestation in the eco-sensitive areas.

***Covering the states of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, the Western Ghats region includes large tracts of biodiverse-rich and Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESA), that need to be protected, both as per the recommendations of the Gadgil Committee (WGEEP), as well as the Kasturi Rangan Committee (2013). However, successive Central Governments and different state governments have ignored these Reports and instead promoted reckless real estate boom, infrastructure ‘development’, indiscriminate construction, plantations, stone mining, sand mining, excavation, quarrying, hill-cutting, tourism etc. on hill tops, degraded forests and even river beds!***

Tragically, the current paradigm of ‘development’ has intensified landslides across many states. India is red-flagged as one of the top-five landslide-prone countries in the world. As per official scientific estimates, there have been 80,000 incidents of landslides between 1998 and 2022 in 147 districts of 17 states and two union territories. Of this, maximum incidents of landslides have occurred in Uttarakhand, Kerala, Jammu and Kashmir, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. Mizoram tops the list, followed by Uttarakhand and Kerala.

Considering the severity of the recent disaster, the National Green Tribunal (Southern Bench) has taken *suo moto* cognizance and directed the Govt. of Kerala to collect data on trigger points such as roads, buildings and existing quarries in and around the affected villages. **We hope the NGT would comprehensively look into all the core causes and issue firm directives to the Govt. of Kerala, other state Governments and the Union of India.**

**State governments across the Western Ghats must urgently carry out time-bound scientific studies, including flood-risk mapping and identification of landslide-prone hotspots, since floods and landslides are cascading disasters. A strict restriction / ban on new and heavy constructions in all vulnerable and unstable areas must be imposed, to prevent landslides and ensure floodplain protection. Governments must instead take pro-active steps to preserve and promote green cover and health, free flow of rivers in these areas.**

**We are also already witnessing Centre – state exchange on the ‘status of warnings’ issued. We feel that both the Central and state Governments must own up responsibility for the disasters, causes of which are also partly systemic. Governments must also make**

**attempts to increase community and people's awareness in eco-sensitive areas to hazard /disaster warnings and support their pre-evacuation in time.**

**NAPM seeks effective implementation of the recommendations of the Madhav Gadgil Committee Report by the Centre and all states across the Western Ghats, at least now, with a sense of urgency and seriousness. We also call for long-term hazard assessment, keeping climate change in view and long-term action plans, to reduce human, bio-ecological and property losses. The administrative and political leadership at the Centre and in Kerala, both current and former, must be held fully accountable for non-implementation of the Gadgil Committee Report and the KSDMA Report, leading to the massive human tragedy.**

***Many of those affected in the landslide are working-class local residents, adivasis, migrant workers employed in tea, coffee and cardamom plantations. Considering the destruction of homes, shops, farms, vehicles etc. the Govt must provide all necessary relief, fair compensation and ensure livelihood-based rehabilitation in safer places. The top-down model of 'development' being pushed and promoted by most political parties, where the vulnerable always pay the costs, often with their lives, needs to be challenged upfront. We hope proper wisdom will prevail on the political leadership and authorities in future, in the wake of these repeated mammoth disasters.***

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