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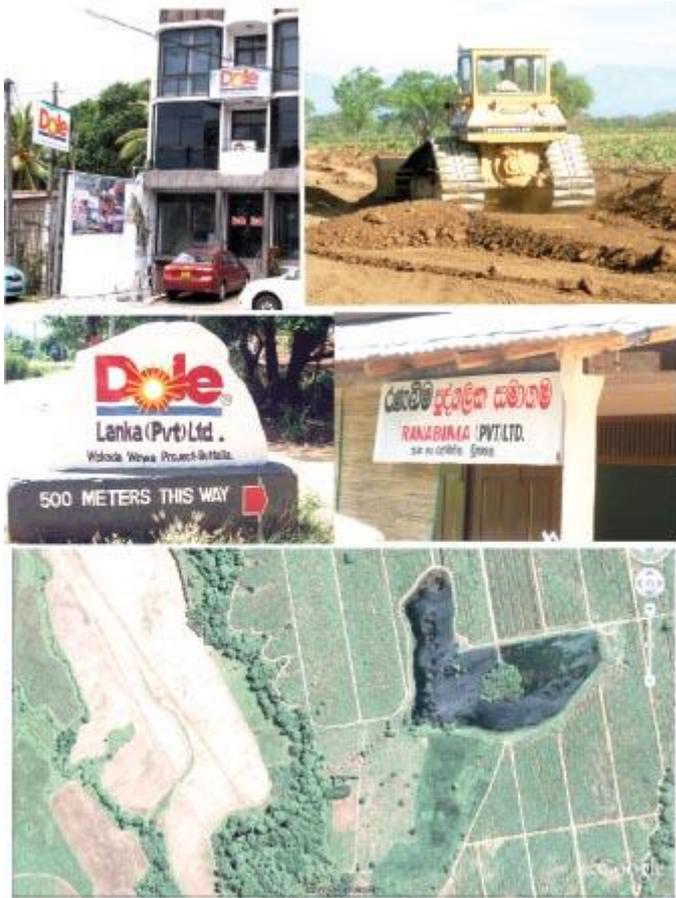
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Illegal Clearing Of Forests By Dole Lanka

By Nirmala Kannangara



Dole Lanka - Wekada Wewa project, Aerial photo of the Wekada Wewa surrounded by the Buttala banana plantation, Ranabima, Buttala, Dole Lanka office at Nawala and Bulldozing the forest

Questions have been raised as to whose forceful hand is behind Dole Lanka (Pvt) Ltd, the local partner of USA based Dole Food Company, that has cleared more than 15, 600 forest lands in the country for banana cultivation in the Somawathiya National Park, Lunugamvehera National Park and in Buttala in the Monaragala district.

Although Dole Lanka (Pvt) Ltd runs the Lunugamvehera and Buttala banana plantations under their own name, the banana plantations in Somawathiya and Buttala are being carried out by their local subsidiaries – Letsgrow (Pvt) Ltd and Ranabima (Pvt) Ltd respectively. None of these projects at Somawathiya National Park, Lunugamvehera National Park and in Buttala have obtained Wild Life Conservation Department, the Forest Department, Agrarian Services Department, Central Environmental Authority, Irrigation Department, Archaeological Department and the respective District and Divisional Secretaries approval as per the State Land Ordinance, to clear the forests.

The Sunday Leader on many occasions tried to contact Dole Lanka (Pvt) Ltd but to no avail. We contacted their lawyer John Wilson of 365, Dam Street, Colombo 12 and Company Secretary Wewe Mudiyanseelage Keerthi Kumara Weerasekera of 365, Dam Street, Colombo 12 and requested a contact number for Dole Lanka, but they refused to furnish details about the company. Later we were asked to send an official request to John Wilson. However, he has not responded for the past one week.

When The Sunday Leader visited the Dole Lanka office at 252, Nawala Road, Nawala, Rajagiriya on August 30 to speak to its General Manager Lenardo, neither he nor Director Human Resources Anusha were willing to speak with us. All attempts to speak to them over

their general number also failed.

“Dole Lanka has openly violated the State land Ordinance and why are the authorities concerned silent without taking action against this company? Who is the powerful person behind these deals?” Environment Conservation Trust Director Sajeewa Chamakara queried. As The Sunday Leader reported earlier 11,600 acres of thick jungle belonging to the Somawathiya National Park and National Live Stock Development Board have been given by the Defence Ministry to Letsgrow (Pvt) Ltd which is a local subsidiary of Dole Food Company.

According to Conservator General of Forests H. M. P. Hitisekera, lands covered by natural vegetation cannot be transferred to any other party without the approval of the Lands Commissioner.

In that context, who has given authority to the Defence Ministry to give away 11,600 acres from Somawathiya to Letsgrow which is owned by Pramodya Wickremasinghe- former Sri Lankan fast bowler, Muthiah Sasidaran – brother of former Sri Lankan spin bowler Muthiah Muralitharan and Sarath Wickremaratne.

Questions have been raised as to whether this ‘illegal land transaction’ was an incentive to Pramodya Wickremasinghe to crossover from the UNP to the ruling party prior to the Presidential election in 2010.

According to the Department of Registrar of Companies, Dole Lanka (Pvt) Ltd was registered on September 9, 2008 and the Directors are Wenceslao (Jr) Abilay and James Prideaux both from the Philippines and their registered local office is at 252, Nawala Road, Nawala, Rajagiriya.

Environmentalism Raveendra Kariyawasam at the National Coordinator Centre for Environmental Studies told The Sunday Leader that 3,000 acres have been given to Dole Lanka in Lunugamvehera.

“This 3,000 acre land belongs to the Lunugamvehera National Park and the Forest Department. This was an elephant corridor previously. They have neither obtained the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) report nor the other approvals from the relevant government departments,” he said.

In addition to which an illegal elephant drive in Lunugamwehera has been carried out by Dole Lanka in order to save their plantation at Lunugamvehera, alleged Environmentalist and elephant enthusiast, Pubudu Weeraratne. More than 40-50 elephants had been driven from Handapanagala to the Lunugamwehera National Park in August 2010. This was carried out despite the fact that 25 elephants out of the 350 that was driven away from the Uda Matthala and Pahala Matthala to the Lunugamwehera National Park in 2008 died due to lack of food and water.

According to Kariyawasam Dole Lanka has denied water for the farmers from the Wekada Wewa in Buttala. Over the past several years the villagers have been taking water from this tank for their cultivations. The banana plantation has expanded round this tank and blocked the waterway denying water to the villagers. In addition to which they have also cleared the Menik Ganga reservation for the banana plantation.

Jagath Gunawardena, Attorney-at-Law specialising in environmental laws says that, preventing the villagers from drawing water from a water source they have used for years is against the Agrarian Development Act No: 46 of 2000.

According to the Department of Registrar of Companies, Ranabima (Pvt) Ltd was registered on March 8, 2010 and its only Director is Rohan Pushpa Kumara Liyanagamage of ‘Maithree’ 16th Mile Post, Raja Mawatha, Buttala.

It is alleged that Chief Minister Uva Province and current Basnayake Nilame (Lay Custodian) of the Ruhunu Maha Kataragama Devalaya Shashindra Rajapaksa who is also the eldest son of Speaker Chamal Rajapaksa and nephew of President Mahinda Rajapaksa is having authority over this company. Four hundred acres of state land in Buttala have been cleared for

yet another banana plantation.

“According to the section 9A of the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance any development activity carried out within a mile of the boundary of a national park can be done only once the Wild Life Conservation Department (WLCD) gives its approval after studying the EIA report. Once the EIA report is submitted to the WLCD, it will be opened for public comments for a period of 30 days. The report has also to be given to Fauna and Flora Advisory Committee and it is only after this process is completed that the WLCD will decide,” said Gunawardena. Divisional Secretary Buttala, Gayan Alagiyawatte confirmed to The Sunday Leader that Dole Lanka had obtained 500 acres from the Kataragama Devalaya and added that there is no necessity to obtain approvals from government departments, since this 500 acre land is not crown property.

“This land was given to Dole Lanka by the Kataragama Devalaya and the project began five to eight years ago. Since this is a large scale project this may be a BOI project but they have not sought any permission from us,” he said.

However, Jagath Gunawardena says that whether it is state land or private land of more than two and a half acres, the relevant approvals have to be obtained before developing the land.

“According to section 23AA of the NEA, any project which falls under the category of prescribed projects as per regulation published in Gazette Extraordinary No: 772/ 22 of June 24, 1993, has to go through the process whether it be state or private owned land,” he said.

Although Dole Lanka has not obtained any approval for the Buttala banana plantation, according to Alagiyawatte, Ranabima (Pvt) Ltd (a subsidiary of Dole Lanka) is in the process of requesting the necessary approvals from the government departments for their 400 acre banana cultivation at Demodara in the Monaragala district. However, Ranabima has so far failed to obtain the necessary approvals for their 400 acre project although it began two years ago according to Alagiyawatte. He also acknowledged that these lands are state lands.

All attempts to contact Divisional Secretary Lunugamvehera, Namal Indika Liyanage for a comment on the 3,000 acre Banana plantation at Lunugamvehera failed.

Conservator General of Forest H.M.P. Hitisekera when contacted by The Sunday Leader said that they have not given any approval for banana cultivation in the Monaragala district.

When asked as to what action they will take against Dole Lanka (Pvt) Ltd for clearing more than 3900 acres in the Monaragala district, Hitisekera said that the people and their belongings including the machinery could be taken into custody. “We should be thankful to the media for bringing these issues to our notice so that we can act immediately,” he added. Chairman Central Environmental Authority (CEA) Charitha Herath said that these projects have neither obtained CEA approval nor have they been submitted for environment impact assessment (EIA).

Director General Wild Life Conservation Department (WLCD) H. D. Ratnayake, too said that the WLCD had not given any approvals to clear jungles for any development projects in the Moneragala district.