

FOOD CRISIS AND THE GLOBAL LAND GRAB

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Troubled waters of Sri Lanka

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By Gilbert Sape

Located 150 km north of the capital, Colombo, the Kalpitiya region is one of the most beautiful coastal areas in the Western Province of Sri Lanka. In 2008, the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority launched the Kalpitiya Dutch Bay Resort Development Project, displacing many traditional fishing and farming communities. Gilbert Sape, Pesticide Action Network Asia and the Pacific's Coordinator for Food Sovereignty and Ecological Programme writes about an encounter with fisherfolks in one of the islands in Kalpitiya.

His name and location might conjure images of a tranquil life, like those on tourism brochures handed at the airport. But their story is anything but calm.

Forty-two year old Kennedy Croose lives in a beautiful island in Sri Lanka with his loving wife and three children. But theirs is a life of turbulence just like the rough Dutch Bay around them: the 121-hectare (300 acres) island where they live and catch fish for generations has been sold by the Sri Lanka government to Qube Lanka Leisure Properties, an Indian company. Soon, it will be a posh beach resort for those seeking tranquility and calm.



We found Kennedy and his family sitting on the shores of Ilipanti Island, weaving fishing nets, seeking refuge from the searing sun under a tattered hut. They were reluctant to talk to us. But eventually, they warmed up. Kennedy shyly narrated that his father and the rest of his family have been fishing around the island for as long as he can remember. Their fishing activities were only intermittently interrupted during Sri Lanka's Civil War.

Known for its bountiful fishing ground, the Ilipanti is home to 25 families of small and migratory fisherfolks. Some of them used to stay in the island only during fishing season. Off-season, they live and tend to their small farm in the mainland, somewhere in Kalpitiya.

When the Civil War subsided in 2009, economic liberalisation rapidly escalated and the casualties were mostly those in rural and coastal communities. With the recent tourism development in Kalpitiya and elsewhere after the war, they were driven away from their farms to give way to new hotels and resorts. As a result, some of them moved permanently to Ilipanti.

Kennedy and his family were hoping that after the war, things would go back to normal. To their surprise, peace time also brings large-scale foreign investments that threaten the livelihoods of small fisherfolks like him. Since the island was sold to an Indian company recently, the fisherfolks have slowly lost their rights over their traditional fishing ground.

The first structures that the new owner built were huge billboards announcing to the world who ruled the island now. A security post was set up at the tip of the island. Security personnel with direct links to the Sri Lankan Navy are manning the post day and night.



While construction of the new resort has yet to start, foundations are slowly being built. The new owner has imposed new rules and regulations that everyone must follow. Fisherfolks are no longer allowed to dock their boats anywhere, nor build new houses or repair their dilapidated huts. Most recently, they were disallowed to talk to people from outside the island. I looked at the huge billboard that sits beside Kennedy's hut: Trespassers will be prosecuted.

"Did the new owner ask you already to vacate the island?" I asked. "Not yet. In fact, they never talked to us directly. Everything was relayed through security personnel. But we don't trust them. We know we will be evicted anytime soon. We are not organised, so we don't know what do," Kennedy nervously confided.

As we were in the middle of our conversation, a burly security personnel rushed towards Kennedy's hut. He berated us for intruding into a private property. He didn't look at nor address Kennedy; his full attention was on us. He threatened to call the Navy and started asking for our identities. We argued and

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reasoned. I saw panic in Kennedy's eyes.

The security personnel chased us away to our small boat. He warned us never to set foot in the island ever again. We sped through the rough waters of Dutch Bay without saying goodbye to Kennedy and his family.

This article is part of a series of feature stories on land grabbing in selected countries in Asia, as part of an awareness-raising campaign on how land grabs worsen hunger, in commemoration of 'World Foodless Day' on October 16 by PAN AP and its partner organisations. (<http://www.panap.net/wfd>)

Source: **PAN AP**



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