

News

American clout makes Lankan agri-farmers go bananas

Valuable State lands allegedly given on the sly while relevant authorities cry foul

By Saradha Mohan Kumar

State lands, including the region around the Somawathie Chaitiya Sanctuary have been issued to an American fruit company for banana cultivation, in various parts of the country, according to environmentalists.

The company, Dole, has acquired 62,500 hectares in the following areas - Buttala, Uva Kudaoya, Galle, Puttalam, Dambulla and Somawathie, but has not obtained the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA), according to them.

The lands belong to several State bodies including the Mahaweli Authority, Forest and Wildlife Departments, and the Viharadevalagam (temple). "About 3,000 hectares in Uva Kudaoya, given to the company, is very valuable because of its rich biodiversity and water resources," said Centre for Environmental Studies National Coordinator Ravindra Kariyawasam.

About 500 hectares of land along the Menik Ganga reservation, 15,000 hectares in the Kantale region and 11,600 hectares in the Somawathie area have been given to the company, he added. He said the farmers in Uva Kudaoya were involved in chena and paddy cultivation before the company established the banana cultivation, but now the farmers are working for Dole.

The farmers are made to work more, but paid less. He said the farmers work from 6.30 a.m to 3.30 p.m and are paid Rs. 300 per day, sans ETF and EPF. "They are promised more pay if they work after 3.30 p.m."

He called this "agro-colonisation", where the land and human resources of the country are used by companies to cultivate crops that are mainly for export. "The company is cultivating Cavendish banana, which is not a Sri Lankan variety, for export. The company sells the damaged ones to the local market," he said

Traditional crops cultivated during the two seasons - Yala (May to August) and Maha (September to March) - will be affected as farmers are shifting to Dole, according to Mr. Kariyawasam. Water resources such as tanks in the area, which were used for chena and paddy cultivation, are facing the threat of depletion due to banana cultivation, since this variety of bananas use a lot of water, said the environmentalist.

According to him, fertilisers and pesticides are also used in the cultivations, which will not only affect the farmers, but the surrounding flora and fauna as well. "It can affect food security, wildlife and water resources," said Mr. Kariyawasam.

Due to the depletion of forest cover, endemic birds such as grey heron will lose their homes. He said the elephants, which are attracted by bananas, could also encroach on the cultivation areas, resulting in the human-elephant conflict worsening.

He said that there are 35 endemic varieties of banana, which could get affected if the Cavendish bananas are grown in the country. The Central Environmental Authority (CEA) has to assess all projects for any harmful impact it could have on the surrounding environment and give its clearance before work is carried out. This has also been mentioned in the Fauna and Flora Act (Amended), Act No. 49 of 1993. However, Dole didn't acquire the EIA, according to the CEA. CEA Chairman Charitha Herath said, "We didn't hear about the project. We didn't issue any EIA to the company."

Environmentalists complain that the CEA, Wildlife and Forest Departments are not taking any responsibility, while natural resources are under serious threat. "They have to take action against Dole for violating third generation human rights - environmental rights," said Mr. Kariyawasam. Sri Lanka ranks fourth in the destruction of primary forests, according to research done by the Food & Agricultural Organisation (FAO) in 2002-2005. "If Dole takes land from the Galle region to cultivate bananas, more primary forests will be destroyed," he said.

In a media conference on Thursday, environmentalists said that they will protest and go to courts, if authorities don't take action against the company. Regarding how the company acquired the land, it is still a puzzle, as the Departments of Forest and Wildlife Conservation (DWC) say it didn't issue lands to the company.

"We have not given areas of the Wildlife Department to them, while receiving reports of incidents in the Somawathie area. So, we are investigating the issue," said DWC Director General H.D. Ratnayake.

Mahaweli Authority Director General D.M.C. Dissanayake said, "Somawathie land comes under us. But, we didn't give it to them." He said he didn't know how the company acquired the land.

Environmentalists also allege that the Army is involved in the distribution of land to the company in the Somawathie region. Representatives of the Company were not available for comment.

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