

Sri Lanka: Cattle farmers' agitation continues in Batti

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Cattle farmers in Batticaloa are embroiled in a relentless struggle against the intrusion of outsiders into their grazing land. This ongoing situation has escalated, leading to physical attacks, threats, the tragic loss of livestock, and the deliberate destruction of their land.

These dairy farmers contend that their traditional grazing grounds, which support an estimated 500,000 cattle and buffalo, have been overtaken by crop farmers from neighbouring districts. Over a span of more than three weeks, these cattle farmers have transformed their protests into a platform to urgently shed light on their dire circumstances. The landscape is adorned with banners and placards bearing slogans advocating for their rights and the welfare of their cattle, creating a poignant visual representation of their fight.

Their demands are unequivocal:

- Access to grazing lands and essential water sources: They are pressing for access to grazing lands and essential water sources, which are critical for the well-being of their livestock
- Protection from harassment and violence: They are seeking safeguards from harassment and violence inflicted by neighbouring farmers
- In-depth investigations into political involvement: There is a resounding call for comprehensive investigations into potential political involvement in the land disputes, with a focus on accountability and justice
- Support for sustainable farming practices: Recognising the importance of sustainability, they request support for adopting sustainable farming practices to ensure their long-term viability
- Adaptation to climate change: With changing environmental conditions in mind, they emphasise the necessity of adapting to climate change and acknowledging the broader challenges facing the agricultural industry

Community leaders and representatives from a variety of cattle farming households have joined forces, underscoring their crucial role in the local dairy industry. Their message emphasises the urgent need to adopt sustainable practices in order to navigate the evolving environmental landscape.

However, this issue goes beyond local concerns, representing a significant call for attention to protect the rights and well-being of these farmers and their cattle. It also highlights broader issues related to land use, sustainable agriculture, and the ability to adapt to the challenges presented by a changing world.

Issues unique to the north and east

All Island Dairy Farmers' Association President Susantha Nawaratne spoke about the challenges facing dairy farmers in the Eastern Province, emphasising the scarcity of farming land and the large herds of around 200-300 animals they managed.

“The lack of farming land is a big issue for the dairy farmers in the Eastern Province. Unlike dairy farmers in places like Kurunegala, Matale, or Gampaha, where a farmer has about 6-10 cows, dairy farmers in the east have large herds of about 200-300 animals. Therefore, they have the issue of not having enough land for the cows to graze and feed.

“On the other hand, chena cultivators are continuing their farming activities on land which is also used by dairy farmers for their cows. The problem is that no land has been identified and allocated to dairy farmers. Both groups have legitimate grievances as they both have to live off the land.”

He called for the allocation of land to resolve the conflicts between cattle farmers and chena cultivators.

“Of course, there are instances where chena cultivators encroach on others’ lands, which also must be addressed. The best solution is to allocate land. Dairy farmers don’t have the freedom to use dried-up tank beds either, as they too have been taken over by others. If at least these are given, it will help the situation.”

No political intervention

Minister of Agriculture Mahinda Amaraweera emphasised that this was a matter to be resolved between the dairy farmers and chena cultivators, stating that political intervention could lead to further divisions.

“We can’t take political decisions in this matter. This is an issue between the dairy farmers and the chena cultivators. I have spoken with the Government Agent to find a solution for this. There are farmers on both sides and it’s best to resolve this without any political intervention, since otherwise various issues will arise. The matter has already created divisions among the Sinhala and the Tamil population there.”

Amaraweera revealed that the Government Agent had been engaged to find a solution and that they were waiting for the Department of Wildlife Conservation to identify grazing lands.

“We have informed the Department of Wildlife Conservation regarding the grazing land. The President too has given directives and we are waiting for them to identify such lands and inform us.”

The situation in Batticaloa remains a pressing issue that necessitates a balanced and comprehensive resolution to address the concerns of both parties involved.

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