

Sri Lanka: Human-elephant conflict: Empty promises and white elephants?

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Releasing gazette still in the process: State Minister

Nearly 90 days have elapsed since the farming community of Walsapugala had commenced a satyagraha demanding the proposed wild elephant management reserve in Hambantota to be included in the government gazette.

Walsapugala is a village in the Hambantota District that has been gravely affected by the human-elephant conflict (HEC) over the last few decades.

Although the gazette is still in the works, the Government's delay in including the proposed reserve in the gazette, despite many assurances, has resulted in the farmers losing faith in the authorities.

The satyagraha campaign demanding a scientific and sustainable solution to the HEC was launched on 18 January. While the Cabinet of Ministers granted their consent for the combined resolution to publish the government gazette for the proposed reserve in late February, little to no progress has been made so far. Various agrarian organisations and farmers associations across the country have joined hands in support of the farming community in Walsapugala.

Reports of crop damage, property damage, along with human and elephant deaths continue to rise each year. According to statistics acquired from the Department of Wildlife and Conservation (DWC), 407 elephants had been found dead in 2019 and the number of human casualties in the same year was counted at 122. While 319 elephants had been found dead just last year, 114 human lives were lost. Each year, between 150-200 elephants are killed due to the HEC.

Farmers' unions could opt for stronger stance

Mahinda Samarawickrama, a farmers' union representative, speaking with *The Sunday Morning*, stated: "We have no new news concerning improvements on the gazette concerning the proposed wild elephant management reserve yet. Multiple farmers associations from across the island have come here to show us their support, and yet, the authorities seem to be turning a blind eye towards our plight.

"It has been nearly three months since the satyagraha has commenced and our demands have not been met so far. I don't think we are asking for too much. We were told the electric fence would be built as per our requirement and demand, but none of the demands have been met as of yet."

Reiterating how the farming community would have to opt for a stronger stance if there isn't significant change being made, Samarawickrama concluded: "We have been here for a long time and we have been suffering because of this for a long time. If our demands will not be met soon, we will not hesitate to take a stronger stance. If they can't come to us, then we will come to them. We are determined to carry on with this fight until our demands are met."

Speaking with *The Sunday Morning*, Walawa Wam Iwura Farmers Association General Secretary Saman Sudarshana shed light on the situation at present.

“The satyagraha campaign has neared three months; we still haven’t received any news of the gazette yet. It is very disheartening to see how the politicians don’t seem to think twice before passing sly remarks without even considering the struggle these farmers are going through. They should come here and see what the reality in this side of the country is. They want to stifle our voices and overlook our struggles but we won’t let it happen. Instead of trying to come up with solutions for the people’s suffering, the Government’s priorities seem to be elsewhere.”

The Sri Lankan people are still recovering from the bitter remnants the three-decade-long civil war has left behind, and the HEC can easily be recognised as one of the biggest issues this country has seen over the last few decades. Although the sheer magnitude of it is hard to comprehend for most, individuals like Saman Sudarshana, Mahinda Samarawickrama, and others in remote areas within the country have had to face it first-hand.

“After speaking with the farmers and farmers associations who have come to support us, it has become evident to us that the main issue that many people from remote areas face is the struggle with these elephants. There is a substantial threat posed to human lives as well as property,” Sudarshana lamented.

The HEC has affected so many districts across the island. Out of the 25 districts in the country, at least 18 districts have been plagued by it.

The Government is now being pressed to come up with better solutions to not only manage the wild elephants in these areas but also to find newer, and long-lasting solutions if the current measures put in place have proven to be futile.

According to Sudarshana, only 40% of the elephant population in the country are being managed by government authorities. The rest is not being managed accordingly, and are thus wreaking havoc and destroying crops.

No cohesive management strategy

Various development projects, constructions, roads, and human settlements have encroached into elephant habitats, cutting off major migratory routes. While a large population of wild elephants being confined to a limited roaming range would inevitably result in frequent conflicts, there still isn’t a cohesive population management strategy in place when it comes to elephants.

“The Government spends so much money on ‘ali wedi’. In the Hambantota District alone, 84,000 units of ali wedi are used within a year. One unit is priced at Rs. 175. Meanwhile, there are some priced at Rs. 300 to Rs. 350 too. The government authorities spend a hefty amount on these,” Sudarshana observed.

“Even the maintenance cost for electric fences isn’t small. There are instances where farmers have drowned in debt to erect electric fences, and then maintain them. All we ask is for some sort of relief; although the proposed wild elephant management reserve would not be a solution to all our problems, we are sure it would bring us some sort of relief.”

Recently, the Committee on Public Accounts (COPA) revealed in Parliament that a total of Rs. 490 million had been spent on electric fences in the last couple of years.

In 2019, the Government had spent Rs. 275,447,639 on building electric fences, and a sum of Rs.

221,505,818 had been incurred in 2020. The total length of the electric fencing at this cost is 4,756 km.

While electric fences have proven to be a white elephant, 33 human deaths and 100 elephant deaths were reported in the first three months of 2021 alone. Whilst approximately 35 of the elephant deaths had occurred due to natural reasons, most of the casualties had occurred due to reasons such as electrocution, succumbing to gunshot wounds, and falling victim to “hakka patas”.

State Minister of Wildlife Protection, Adoption of Safety Measures including the Construction of Electrical Fences and Trenches, and Reforestation and Forest Resource Development Wimalaweera Dissanayake, speaking with *The Sunday Morning*, said: “It is only a matter of time until the proposed wild elephant reserve is published in the government gazette, and until that happens, there is very little we can do. It is still in the process.”

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