

# **Sri Lanka: Activists to agitate against Singaporean multinational in sugar plantation venture**

Wednesday 25 May 2022, by [WARAVITA Pamodi](#) (Date first published: 23 February 2022).

**Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) Politburo Member Samantha Vidyaratna warned yesterday (22) that the sugar plantation venture led by the Singaporean multinational corporation, Singapore Gazelle Ventures (Pvt.) Ltd. will lead to traditional owners of lands becoming “slaves” and said that a large scale protest will therefore be held against the venture in the Uva Province, during the course of the next month.**

“The full project plan is to give 65,000 hectares (ha) of the Uva and Eastern Provinces, within the Ampara, Monaragala, and Badulla Districts, to multinational corporations. The first Cabinet paper regarding this was passed in 2006. Continuous protests have followed this project. The latest aim is to give 149.3 ha in the Rideemaliyadda Pradeshiya Sabha area to a Singaporean multinational company for a sugar plantation. This land is environmentally, archaeologically, and agriculturally significant and is an elephant habitat. Giving this land to a multinational company will lead to people becoming slaves in their own land. We need real development. Ventures which lead to livelihood and environmental destruction are not development,” claimed Vidyaratna.

These comments were made at a press conference held yesterday, following a multi stakeholder discussion, consisting of environmental organisations, labour unions, and civil society activists. At the discussion, an understanding had been reached with the “Uva Wellassa Jana (Peoples) Aithi (Rights) Surakimu (Protection) Peramuna (Front)” in order to ensure that not even an inch of the aforementioned land is given to corporations.

“The said company has so far tried four times, including this month as well, to bring bulldozers into the 149.3 ha land. We have driven them out each time. We will also take legal action against this and hold a large scale protest in Bibile next month. Most of the map that was drawn by multinational corporations for the 65,000 ha of land is part of the old Eelam map. Now that the war is over, those in power are selling this land, unconditionally, to put a few US dollars into their own pockets. We will not allow this land to be sold,” stressed Vidyaratna.

Vidyaratna further pointed out that the original 65,000 ha includes lands traditionally owned by the three Adivasi tribes in Sri Lanka – the Dambane Wannila Aththo’s tribe in Mahiyanganaya, the Suda Wannila Aththo’s tribe in Maha Oya, Ampara, and the Rathugala Neegala tribe in Bibile. “The multinational corporations are interested in this land because our leaders are selling them off cheaply, along with the unstated promise of extremely cheap labour from the area,” he added.

He further accused IMS Holdings (Pvt.) Ltd. – the Sri Lankan company jointly working with Gazelle Ventures – of bribing monks and officials in the area, including politicians.

A farmer representing the farming community in Rideemaliyadda also spoke at the said press

conference. “Right now, the Mahaweli Authority has initiated legal proceedings against 49 farmers to kick us out of our lands. When President Gotabaya Rajapaksa came to the ‘Gama Samaga Pilisandarak (dialogue/talk with the village)’ programme in our area in late 2020, we raised this issue with him and he told us that if we own the lands, the Mahaweli Authority should not interfere with us. The President said that his words should be treated as circulars. But that is not happening,” he said.

Furthermore, the Movement for Land and Agricultural Reform (MONLAR) Chairman Chinthaka Rajapaksa, addressing the same press conference, said that “whilst the leaders may be dealing with a US dollar crisis, this land is not the personal property of the Rajapaksa family”.

Speaking to The Morning yesterday, the Centre for Environmental Justice (CEJ) Senior Advisor Hemantha Withanage said that although an environmental impact assessment (EIA) was done by the Central Environmental Authority (CEA) in 2017, approval was only given for the establishment of a factory site. “Our question is how can you run a factory without sugarcane? Where is the sugarcane going to come from? The EIA that was done is itself problematic as they have just approved one part but not assessed the rest of the project,” said Withanage.

Commenting on the eviction notices of the Mahaweli Authority, Withanage said that farmers traditionally lived in these lands, which had initially belonged to the Wildlife Conservation Department. “During Ranasinghe Premadasa’s tenure as the President, he attempted to give the farmers full ownership of their lands. In 2008, with the Rambakan Oya project, the land ownership was transferred to the Mahaweli Authority.”

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