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Keppapulavu and Puthukudiyiruppu — Situation Report

The people of Keppapulavu and Puthukudiyiruppu whose lands and houses have been occupied forcefully by the Sri Lankan Security Forces for the past 7 years have launched an indefinite peaceful demonstration for the return of their ancestral lands and properties. The people of Keppapulavu have put up some temporary shelters along the road in front of the camp in the area which was once their lands with houses etc. and they are there for the last 19 days braving the heat of the day, dew in the nights, sudden rains etc. They are there with their children. The people of Puthukudiyiruppu whose lands have been occupied by the Security Forces since the end of the war have also put up a temporary shelter at the entrance of the Pradesha Saba Premises which is situated opposite to the army camp which was once their land with 49 houses. These people are staging an indefinite hunger-strike for the past 16 days. Besides their demand for the release of their lands and properties, another demand of theirs is the release of the lands of the Keppapulavu people.

Keppapulavu G.S. Division

The Villages: The Village of Keppapulavu is a village in the interior about 5-6 k.m. away from the Puthukudiyiruppu town. The villagers are ordinary simple people who earn their living by fishing prawns in the Nanthikkadal (a lagoon with a rich harvest of prawns in certain seasons) and by paddy cultivation. Even the women in the women led families could go freely to the lagoon to catch prawns to get some income for their families. With a heavy presence of the Security Forces along a long stretch of the Nanthikkadal these women are not free to go there also.

There are in Keppapulavu G.S. Division three other smaller villages Pillakudiyiruppu, Seeniamottai and Sooriapuram. Of these the villages of Seeniamottai and Sooriapuram have been resettled and Keppapulavu and Pillakudiyiruppu have to be resettled.

Keppapulavu

There are 145 families belong to this Village. Their lands have been occupied by the Sri Lankan Air Force since the end of the war and these people need to be resettled in their lands (The number of women led families in this Village is not available.)

Pillakudiyuruppu

There are 84 families belonging to this Village and of these 25 are women-led families. In the year 2005, 54 of these families have been allotted ¼ acre each. (see the annexed sheet) these lands also have been occupied by the Sri Lankan Air Force since the end of the war.

Protest of the People

These people are now (18.02.2017) staging a peaceful protest requesting their lands back and their protest has reached the 19th day. From time to time they had been raising their grievances to the Politicians, MPs, Provincial Council members. Promises had been given for a speedy solution, but there was no progress.

Of late a promise was given to settle the matter on the 15th January 2017. Then the villagers were asked to come on the 24th of January to settle the matter with the Forest Department Officials. But the Forest Department Officials came in between and went without meeting the people. Then the G.S. concerned gave another date (31st of January) and told the villagers that on that day all the concerned officials would be there to give the final solution. On that day no officers concerned (from the Kachcheri and Forest Department) turned up and the people were waiting for a long time and were frustrated and since then started their indefinite protest which is now on the 19th day.

The Present Situation of the People

The People are in the open on the side of the road in front of the Air Force Camp which occupies their former houses and properties. There is only a temporary shelter over their head. They are there 24 hours of the day in the hot sun, in the dew in the night and the rain. The health condition especially of the Children and the elderly is not good. Yesterday (17.2.2017) the health officials and nurses visited them and they found that the children have a lot of health problems related to malnutrition, untimely meals, exposure to the cold and heat etc.

Though lot of people and organizations from even the South, including Buddhist monks, other Religious Bodies, Politicians, University students, etc. visit them and are able to understand the legitimacy of these people demands nothing seen to move the Government.

In spite of the promises given by the Government Officials (eg. Promise given by Minister Swaminathan there days ago) the ground situation is that the Air Force personnel are consolidating their infrastructure. There is a lot of work going on in and around the one time Rural Health Centre which is also under their occupation. Yesterday we saw a notice being displayed in Tamil that this property belongs to the Air Force and anybody who enters it without permission will be shot down. There are also other acts of intimidation such as photographing the protesters and the visitors, sending in people (intelligence men) in the midst of protesters to gather information and to disturb the people etc.

The people express the view that they had expected good governance from this Government and voted them into power and now they feel that their hopes are frustrated.

Puthukudiyurpu: 19 ¼ areas of lands situated in front of the Pradesha Saba building at Puthukudiyurpu-Iranaipalai road has been forcefully occupied by the Sri Lankan Security Forces since 2009 when the 49 families had to leave their homes during the final stages of the war.

When these people returned after being detained in the refugee camps in Cheddikulam they found that their lands and houses were taken over by the Sri Lankan Security Forces and these people since then are living in rented houses and in the houses of their near and dear ones in the neighbourhood. These people had been living in these lands for several generations and they have valid deeds for their lands.

One nursing home 'Dr. Ponambalam Nursing Home' which was rendering yeomen service for the people of the region during the years of blockade of many essentials including medicine etc which in this area and a number of houses have been occupied by the Security Forces. Most of the 49 houses have been pulled down and razed to the ground. Still coconut trees and others trees bearing fruit which had been watered and reared by these people can be seen from outside.

There were only 49 families when these people left their homes in 2009 and now this number has increased.

Several of their attempts to regain their ancestral lands and homes, several meetings into the MPs, Ministers, Provincial Council Members etc have failed and as the final resort these people are on hunger strike in rotation in front of the Pradesha Saba office.

The people also complain that the presence of an army camp along a long stretch of the main road in the heart of the town disturb very much their movements up and down. The

women and young girls feel that they are not safe. They feel that they are targets of comments and lurid remarks when they pass along the road.

These people say that they will continue with their hunger strike until they have their lands back.

The remark made by the Government Minister Hon. Rajitha Senaratne that the problem of these people cannot be settled overnight looks very strange. These people had been claiming for their ancestral lands for the last seven years!

S. V. B. Mangalarajah.

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