

30th January, 2019

Statement on the ongoing struggle by the villagers of Keppapulavu to reclaim their lands

We, the People's Alliance for the Right to Land (PARL), are concerned about the way in which the Police dealt with protestors in Keppapulavu, Mullaitivu, last weekend, in their demand for the release of their lands. On the morning of the 26th of January, 2019, a group of courageous and resolute women from Keppapulavu, marched about two kilometers towards their military occupied lands, to demand for their release. As they walked towards the main entrance of the army camp, they were met by a large number (approx. 45) of Police officers and at least five police vehicles (including a bus, lorry, jeeps and a car), parked outside the camp gates. The group of women were soon joined by more displaced villagers, as they stood in front of the Police vehicles parked in manner to deliberately obstruct the protestors from gathering opposite the camp gate. The protestors intended to sit opposite the camp gate until such time that they received a definite and written assurance from the authorities regarding the release of their lands.

There was constant surveillance by a military personnel in civil, who was photographing and filming protestors, observers and their vehicles, from inside the camp, on both Saturday and Sunday, whilst a team from PARL was there in support of the community, to observe and report on the protest.

On January 24th at about 7.30pm, the Police served summons to Mrs. K. Chandraleela and Mrs. Indrani Vivehanandan to appear in court the following day (25th). The Mulliyawalai Police had made a petition to the Mullaitivu Magistrates Courts about the possibility of a protest on the 25th of January, but, the Courts had upheld the people's right to protest, and instructed the Police not to obstruct. The Magistrate had gone on to instruct the respondents to not block the roads, throw stones at the camp or cause any disruption that would cause any public hindrance.

The Police at the site on the 26th morning said that they were there to ensure that the Court Order was adhered to. However, it was very clear right from the onset, that the Police had no regard for the protestors, their rights or the directives issued by the courts reinforcing their right to a peaceful protest. This begs the question as to why the Police are more insistent on restraining legal land owners from protesting, rather than in questioning the legality of the army occupation. Police vehicles and personnel were stationed in strategic places by the side of the road, and in the shade, compelling the protestors to stay hidden

from view behind the Police bus, or to stay out in the burning sun. We raise concerns regarding the Police restricting the community from cooking their meals in the shade, the military cutting off water supply to the public utility outside the camp, and depriving basic human considerations for a community displaced from their own lands. The people present, including the elderly and children, were greatly inconvenienced and harassed in their effort to exercise their rights reaffirmed by the Court Order.

We are also deeply concerned by the way the Police implemented the second Court Order issued on site later that day (Saturday the 26th at around 6:30pm). The Order instructed that a 75 meter stretch on either side of the road from the point of the gate to the army camp, would be out of bounds for the protestors. Even though it was dark by then, the protestors adhered to the order and shifted their protest site outside the perimeter, having measured exactly 75 meters from the gate. Thereafter, the Police opposed them setting up on the side of the army camp, even though they argued that there was a deep trench on the opposite side, and that nowhere in the Court Order had it specified which side of the road they could protest on. After much back and forth, the Police told the people to do as they pleased, and that they would not be held responsible if any harm were to come to the protestors. The Police also tried to intimidate protestors by stating that they would look through the video footage of the protest, and take action against all those who “shouted” at the protest. Fearing consequences, villagers shifted to the opposite side of the camp, having to precariously situate themselves on a narrow strip of land between a fence and a deep trench, with some old planks put across the trench to cross to and fro.

On the following day (28th Monday), the Courts had instructed the above respondents, and the lawyers, to negotiate with the Police where they could hold their protest. Until such time, the communities would continue to demand for their lands along the trench.

We wish to reiterate the people's right to protest and to be treated justly with dignity. We wish to repeat our calls for the immediate release of all occupied lands in Keppapulavu and other areas, and take urgent action to provide these communities and others whose lands were periodically released, with comprehensive assistance for resettlement, and reparations proportionate to the damage to property, significant economic loss and destruction of their culture and way of life, as a result of their prolonged displacement.

People's Alliance for Right to Land