

11th February, 2020

Five years following Cabinet Decision to return – Panama people still not home
PARL Statement in Solidarity with Panama land struggle

Today marks five years since the Cabinet Decision to release the Panama lands back to their original owners. In a Cabinet Decision on the 11th of February, 2015, the former government decided “to release the land under the control of the Sri Lanka Air Force situated in Panama ... except for the 25 acres where some buildings are being constructed, to enable it to be distributed among the landless persons of the area.”¹ To date, the order is yet to be implemented.

The people of the Sasthrawela and Ragamwela villages in Panama, Ampara district, having been forcibly evicted from their lands in 2010 (after the war), have been struggling to return to their homes ever since. A year after the end of the war, on the night of July 17, 2010, the villagers recount how a group of masked, heavily armed men with clubs and weapons entered Ragamwela, burned down seven huts and a local Buddhist Temple, and assaulted villagers. Villagers claim that the Air Force and the Special Task Force (STF), with the support of a former Pradeshiya Sabha Chairperson, (who allegedly had close links to the then Rajapaksa government,) was responsible for burning down their huts, and chasing them off their land. There were 75 and 34 families evicted from Sasthrawela and Ragamwela, respectively. As a result they have been living with host families, relatives and on rent for the past decade.

Responding to an appeal by the community, the Presidential Secretariat issued a letter on August 3, 2015 to the Ampara divisional secretary, identifying the 25 acres that would be retained by the Air Force. On August 24, the Secretariat requested that remaining land be measured and returned to the community. But yet again, no progress was made.

Therefore, the people of Ragamwela forcibly entered their lands on March 26, 2016. The Pottuvil police and Lahugala divisional secretary attempted to stop the community from entering and thereafter from staying on, but the community was determined. The police then brought an interim order² from the Pottuvil Magistrate to evict the people. Two days later, the protesters challenged the order, and on March 30, the Pottuvil magistrate court ruled in favor of the community, and granted them the right to enter and remain on their land.³ Further, the court, in a written order, requested the authorities to survey the land and come to a resolution. However, on May 24, 2016, the Lahugala divisional secretary issued a letter to the residents demanding that they leave their lands. The villagers refused to do so. Instead, they started clearing their lands to rebuild their homes and to start their cultivation.

Currently, the people of Ragamwela who have forcibly returned to their own lands, continue to live in thatched huts. They have received no assistance from the government, and, the Air Force continues to reside in the vicinity and maintain control of the area, including entry points to the village. The Air Force

¹ Office of the Cabinet of Ministers-Sri Lanka, Press briefing of Cabinet Decision, Release of Land and Property in the High Security Zone, February 11, 2015 - http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.lk/cab/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=16&Itemid=49&lang=en&dID=5948

² Magistrate’s Court of Pottuvil Case No. 8455/PC/09.

³ P.D. De Silva, “Govt. urged to return lands to people of Paanama,” Daily Mirror, January 6, 2018, <http://www.dailymirror.lk/article/Govt-urged-to-return-lands-to-people-of-Paanama-143485.html>

has maintained that they are awaiting orders from Colombo to leave their lands, one of the community leaders said.⁴

While the State has appealed against the magistrate's order, the Ragamwela people have filed an additional case against nine state officials, demanding that the Cabinet Decision be implemented. The case is still ongoing.

To date, there is no confirmation from the Government about handing over the land legally to its original owners. No assistance has been provided to the Panama community, and they have received no compensation for a decade of displacement and loss of income. Prior to their displacement, the community relied on farming and fishing, but between 2010 and 2016, they have had no access to these livelihoods.

A decade since their forcible eviction from their homes, and five years following the Cabinet Decision to return to their lands, the people of Panama continue their struggle to go back home. **The People's Alliance for Right to Land (PARL) stand in solidarity with the displaced people of Panama, and reiterate their demand to the Government to implement the Cabinet Decision, remove the military from their lands, and allow them to return home.**

⁴ Human Rights Watch, "Why can't we go home?" Military Occupation of Land in Sri Lanka (2018) - <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/10/09/why-cant-we-go-home/military-occupation-land-sri-lanka>