

## **PARL: Urgent Action Needed on Brutal Assault of Farmers and Land Rights Activists by Gal Oya Plantations Officials**

The People's Alliance for Right to Land (PARL) vehemently condemns the horrifying events of 5th April 2023 at Moravil Ara, in Samanthurai, where Mr. Nihal Ahmed, the CEO of Human Elevation Organisation (HEO), his team members and dispossessed farmers were apprehended, taken to an isolated location, and beaten for several hours by about twenty-five persons, including men recognised as officials of the Gal Oya Plantations Pvt Ltd. Mr. Ahmed is a prominent member of PARL and the convenor of Ampara District Alliance for Right to Land. He has been a human rights advocate for many years, including for land rights of the poor in Sri Lanka.

Based on information available to PARL, it is known that in 1960, approximately 7250 acres of land in the Ampara District which were traditionally used by paddy farmers for cultivation were demarcated for sugar cane cultivation by the then-government. This action by the state Sugar Corporation saw the dispossession of the traditional paddy farmers of the area. Some were given plots of land to cultivate under the strict condition that they only engage in sugar cane plantation. Others who were dispossessed and did not receive plots of land to cultivate were not compensated nor provided any redress or solution to their loss of livelihood. Another action taken by the state was the installing of farmers from other areas on the land from which the traditional paddy farmers had been evicted. This practice led to tensions between farming communities. Between 1997 and 2007 the Sugar Corporation ceased to function, and farmers grew paddy in these areas for survival and found paddy cultivation to be more profitable. From 2007, the lands were managed via the public-private partnership Gal Oya Plantations Pvt Ltd, in which the government holds 51% stake. Land use has been highly controlled throughout. There is now an established view that sugar cane was an unsuitable crop for cultivation in the area, and due to the failure of the crop, many farmers and their families have become destitute.

In the recent past, PARL has been engaged with the issues relating to dispossession and the right to traditional lands of the farmers. It is an issue that is recognised as prevalent within the sugar cane plantations in the Ampara District, and PARL has made several interventions to engage responsible authorities including the President and Members of Parliament in this regard.

In the context of this ongoing engagement with officials, on 5 April 2023, Mr. Ahmed with a group entailing Mr. P. Kairuddin, the President of PARL-Ampara District, Mr. M.M.F. Ifthikar and several other farmers made a field visit to collect information relating to identification and recording the location of dispossessed lands and met several farmer communities in the area. Upon ending their meeting and collection of information, the team had commenced their return, when a group of persons who identified themselves as officials of the Gal Oya Plantations (Pvt) Ltd stopped the vehicle of Mr. Ahmed. Mr. Ahmed and his team were taken to an isolated location where they were physically assaulted by approximately 25 persons for several hours, subjected to death threats and forced to strip before being filmed and threatened with public exposure if they were to make any formal complaints.

Mr. Ahmed and members of his team have lodged a complaint about this incident at the police station in Samanthurai and relevant investigations have commenced.

PARL vehemently condemns the brutal attack on farmers and land rights advocates. It also calls upon the relevant authorities to immediately carry out a thorough and impartial investigation to bring the perpetrators to justice. PARL also urges all relevant authorities to give immediate attention to the long-standing issue of dispossessed farmers in the Ampara District and provide individual and collective redress without further delay.

On behalf of the members of PARL



Sandun Thudugala

**Commissioners of the PARL People's Land Commission**

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