

Hon. Anura Kumara Disanayake
President of Sri Lanka
Presidential Secretariat
Galle Face
Colombo 01

Awarding of Freehold Deeds under the 'Himikama' Programme

We have come to know through news on media that the programme to award freehold deeds, which was implemented by the previous government under the name 'Urumaya', is going to be initiated in Anuradhapura under your patronage on 27th of this month under the programme named 'Himikama' with some changes to the previous programme.

As we see it, no matter with what good expectations this initiative has been taken, it creates a grave risk which will result in a serious crisis for small-scale food producers, who shoulder the responsibility for the greater part of the food production in the country, which ultimately lead not only to a food crisis and an economic crisis, but also to a serious social crisis in the country.

From the early days of the establishment of the farmer colony projects created by the smallholder farmers, who formed the basis of Sri Lanka's agriculture, since the 1950s, the World Bank and other donor agencies continued to argue that it was not a viable option, and that instead, large-scale plantations should be created with large private investments and wage-earning agricultural workers should be created under them. The prediction of those institutions even with regard to such farmer colonies was that, over time, a large number of people who had received land grants would sell their lands and transfer their land ownership, and that a small group of people in whose hands the land ownership would be concentrated would establish large-scale plantations. On the other hand, those institutions also believed that those who lose their land would either become labourers on the plantations that would be created or migrate to cities and join the urban workforce. However, such a situation did not arise due to the restrictions that prevailed on transfer of land ownership (we do not deny the fact that certain issues have arisen due to informal land transactions). Subsequently, donor agencies, including the World Bank, continuously pressured all governments to grant freehold land ownership to these people in order to overcome the legal restrictions that prevented the release of lands to the market, which was the obstacle to the creation of such a situation. It is in order to satisfy this requirement that the Ranil Wickramasinghe government implemented the 'Urumaya' programme. We would like to recall that, during the 'Urumaya' promotion programmes, 'Urumaya' was introduced as a programme under which people are provided with land deeds that can be sold.

Throughout the past decades, the main demand of the people was not to provide them with freehold land ownership, but to repeal the provisions for the transfer of land ownership to the eldest male child of the family in the event of the death of the owner without naming a successor, which is an outdated provision in the Land Development Ordinance and which restricted the children who remain on the land and develop it from getting the ownership of the land, and also to remove the prohibition on mortgaging the land to provide for access to capital for land development. These issues have now been legally resolved.

On the other hand, 'A Thriving Nation - A Beautiful Life' policy statement of the National People's Power, which was approved by the people with an overwhelming majority in the last elections, spoke about "a progressive policy under which small-scale cultivation units will be converted into medium and large-scale cultivation units under farmer companies/cooperatives, while maintaining their land ownership." However, instead of creating an agriculture that ensures the collective production and collective distribution of farmers' profits, freehold land ownership has paved the way for large-scale private agricultural enterprises, which institutions including the World Bank have been recommending for decades and which the Ranil Wickramasinghe government tried to implement. We are of the opinion that this is completely contrary to the leftist aspirations of the National People's Power to achieve for all the ownership and participation in the economy. On several occasions during the last presidential election campaign (including in the

Conference with Surveyors), you, as the then presidential candidate, made a number of very progressive comments on the land issues prevailing in this country, and it is our understanding that the very arguments we have outlined above have formed the basis for the ideas expressed on those occasions with a very deep understanding of the economic, social, cultural and emotional dimensions of land ownership.

It goes without saying that, in a situation where we are already experiencing the impact on paddy price created by monopolies and cartels formed by large-scale producers, there is a risk that this step will also lead to a similar situation in agricultural production through the concentration of land ownership. It will also be a structural transformation that will deal a fatal blow on the country's economy as well as on the efforts of the government to manage the economy in a planned manner.

We are also aware of the fact that your party, as the political movement behind the 1971 and 1988-89 uprisings, is well aware that the tensions that have existed throughout the history of this country regarding land ownership are linked to the popular uprisings of both colonial and post-colonial history. Moreover, we also believe that it is not even necessary to remind you that the future tensions of landless generations that may arise through such a project implemented under a government led by a party with such an understanding can have very adverse consequences.

Considering all these factors, we respectfully request you to reconsider the implementation of the 'Himikama' programme that has been planned to be implemented.

Yours faithfully,

Natasha Vanhoff
People's Alliance for Right to Land

Copy to:

1. Hon. Lal Kantha, Minister of Agriculture, Livestock, Land and Irrigation
2. Hon. Aravinda Senarath, Deputy Minister of Land and Irrigation
3. Secretary to the President
4. Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Land and Irrigation
5. Commissioner General of Lands