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இலங்கை மனித உரிமைகள் ஆணைக்குழு
Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka

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Press Notice

Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka Releases the Report on Chronic Flooding and Human Rights Violations in Matara District

The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, in fulfillment of its statutory mandate to protect and promote the fundamental rights of all citizens and to prevent human rights violations within the state administrative mechanism, has released a comprehensive investigative report regarding the chronic flooding in the Matara District, with a specific focus on the catastrophic conditions experienced in 2023.

The investigation, conducted under the powers vested by the *Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka Act No. 21 of 1996*, evaluates the responsibilities of state institutions and the resulting impact on human rights. While the environment serves as the foundation for human development, this report highlights how a combination of climate change and shortsighted human interventions has transformed natural occurrences into severe human catastrophes.

The report was prompted by formal complaints (Ref: HRC/MT/392/23 and HRC/MT/R60/23) filed with the Matara Regional Office and corroborated by media monitoring conducted by the Commission's Research and Monitoring Division. During the 2023 southwest monsoon, the Matara District suffered from severe, prolonged flooding. The Commission identified that the water stagnation lasting weeks and months severely disrupted daily life, healthcare, and livelihoods, while also creating secondary threats such as the spread of leptospirosis, dengue fever, and the migration of crocodiles into residential areas.

A central investigative question was whether this disaster was purely a natural phenomenon or exacerbated by the design and management flaws of the *Nilwala* River permanent salt-water exclusion barrier, managed by the Department of Irrigation and the National Water Supply and Drainage Board.

The investigation confirms that the disaster's severity was compounded by human and engineering failures, including:

- The obstruction of the historic Dutch Canal.
- Inadequate maintenance of traditional irrigation systems.
- Infrastructure impacts from the Southern Expressway.
- The installation of sheet piles at the salt-water barrier, which impeded water drainage.

- A systemic breakdown in coordination between state institutions and a failure to adhere to the technical recommendations provided by the Central Environmental Authority.

The Commission concludes that these failures directly violated the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Articles 12(1), 12(2), and 14 of the Constitution of Sri Lanka, specifically concerning the right to life, the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to the highest attainable standard of health, and the right to freedom of occupation.

The report goes beyond identifying shortcomings by proposing concrete short, medium, and long-term solutions:

- **Immediate Relief:** Implementation of scientifically assessed compensation for affected farmers and relief for those in the informal sector who lost their livelihoods.
- **Infrastructure Rehabilitation:** Desilting of waterways, reconstruction of the Dutch Canal, and upgrading of primary pumping stations.
- **Policy Reform:** The establishment of a national policy for infrastructure projects that is free from political influence, and the creation of a "Disaster Reparation Trust Fund."

The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka extends its gratitude to all state officials, district and divisional secretariats, civil society organizations, farmer representatives, and witnesses who contributed data and testimony to this report. The Commission firmly believes that the timely implementation of these recommendations will ensure environmental justice and protect the fundamental rights of the people of the Matara District.

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