

Statement on the right to land and housing of the Malayaha community in the Aftermath of Cyclone Ditwah

Cyclone Ditwah which has left widespread destruction across the country, had a disproportionately wide impact on the Malayaha community in Sri Lanka.

For over 200 years, the Malayaha community has endured life on plantation lands under conditions of extreme deprivation and marginalization. The community, who were deprived of their land and housing rights for generations, confined to dilapidated line rooms with inadequate infrastructure, poor sanitation, isolated from regular public services, these communities have long been denied the dignity of secure housing and land ownership. The recent devastation by Cyclone Ditwah has not only exposed the fragility of their living conditions but has also intensified their marginalization to catastrophic levels.

Serious issues have emerged that are specific to the Malayaha community that further compound the suffering of the affected. There are reports of plantation companies actively denying or obstructing donations meant for the victims, cutting off vital lifelines of support. The geographical isolation of their settlements, tucked away in remote areas of estates, has created specific and severe challenges: relief supplies and food rations have taken much longer to reach these communities, leaving families without adequate food, water, or medical aid for extended periods. Daily wage earners, whose livelihoods depend on their ability to work, have been unable to earn a living for weeks due to the destruction of roads.

While some families have been relocated from destroyed line houses and high-risk areas to camps and shelters, the conditions remain deeply inadequate. In plantations where no large common spaces, such as churches, Kovils, temples, or schools, are available to serve as temporary shelters, families have been forced to live in makeshift huts constructed from plastic sheets, erected over the cold, hard ground of the mountainous terrain. More than a month after the cyclone, many families are still waiting for National Building Research Organisation (NBRO) safety assessments. In the absence of timely assessments and viable alternatives, some families have been forced to return to structurally compromised line houses, with visible cracks and damage, situated in areas with imminent landslide risk.

Although the government has announced Rs. 25,000 in rental assistance for families who must permanently relocate until alternative secure housing and land are provided, this support has proven inadequate and impractical. Secure housing in these areas is scarce, and landlords have exploited the crisis by raising rental prices and demanding key money as high as Rs. 100,000, an impossible sum for families. For the vast majority of affected families, particularly in the plantations, renting is simply not a viable option. The specific linguistic, cultural, and logistical needs of the Malayaha community are being systematically ignored. Critical information and documents related to emergency evacuations, relief, and relocation are not being provided in Tamil, the primary language of the community, further marginalizing and excluding them from the very processes meant to help them.

This is not merely a natural disaster; it is a crisis rooted in decades of systemic neglect, exploitation, and denial of basic rights. Cyclone Ditwah has brought to light the continued structural discrimination the Malayaha community, and made it evident that temporary solutions, empty promises, and patchwork relief efforts are not enough.

We, as the People's Alliance for Right to Land(PARL), a collective of civil society organisations, activists, lawyers, and the community, demand land and housing with full ownership for the Malayaha community. The people of the plantations deserve secure, permanent homes on land that belongs to them, land where they can rebuild their lives, raise their families, and live without the constant fear of displacement or dispossession. They

deserve infrastructure that can withstand natural disasters, access to services in their own language, and recognition as equal citizens of this nation.

Our longstanding demands for the Malayaha community include: first, a secure title for land; and second, separate housing with a secure land title, which would be recognized as a new village outside of plantation company control and under state administration.

In response to the Cyclone Ditwah crisis, we also demand:

- No discrimination between plantation and non-plantation communities in the treatment of cyclone-affected people, specifically regarding compensation and aid distribution.
- The state must practice a participatory consultation process in selecting suitable alternative land, involving the affected community, government institutions, civil society, the NBRO, and the plantation companies. This process must ensure that previous failed models, such as apartments, are not imposed on the Malayaha community as alternative housing, which would further trap them in insecure housing conditions.

The government, plantation companies, and all relevant authorities must act immediately to provide the Malayaha community with land ownership and proper housing. Anything less is a continuation of the injustice that has defined their existence for two centuries.