



Rainforest Protectors of Sri Lanka

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To:

President Maithripala Sirisena

Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe

Deputy Environment Minister Wasantha Aluwihare

Conservator General Anura Sathurusinghe

Requesting immediate action to protect Sinharaja World Heritage Rainforest

Sinharaja World Heritage Rainforest, the last virgin Rainforest left in Sri Lanka, and the surrounding unprotected Rainforests, have faced many issues in recent times threatening its rich bio-diversity. Large tracts of Rainforests that are directly linked to Sinharaja World Heritage Rainforest, are still in the hands of Land Reforms Commission (LRC) and remain unprotected. A few more ecologically important rainforests are privately held and being sold and clearcut for tea and palm oil plantations. Environmentalists and prominent Scientists have been suggesting for decades, that these Rainforests be annexed to Sinharaja due to their rich bio-diversity found nowhere else on earth. Failure to do so by previous Governments have resulted in accelerated deforestation and creating conflicts due to issues such as road construction through these forests.

1. Acquisition of 2,500 hectares of Rainforest land held by LRC into Sinharaja World Heritage Rainforest

According to the cabinet paper bearing No. PS/CS/26/2004 dated 22.07.2004 all the forest lands in the custody of the Land Reform Commission that adjoin the Sinharaja National Wilderness Area or situated within 0.5 km from the boundary have been prescribed to be ceded to the Forest Department. To date, this has not been completed. Due to the inaction by relevant Government Ministries to complete the above task, an effort by certain parties to build a road through this Rainforest created a major conflict in northern Sinharaja in 2011. After many Environmental organizations and concerned citizens protested against building a new road over an old foot path through the forest, former Environment Minister Anura Priyadarshana Yapa formed a committee to carryout a comprehensive study in the said region. The report from this committee recommended that new road construction through the Rainforest be immediately halted while recommending renovating existing road up to Illumbakande to meet the needs of the residents. The report also called for immediate action to acquire 2,500 hectares of Rainforest land currently under Land Reforms Commission (LRC) into Sinharaja World Heritage Rainforest and be vested under Forest Conservation Department (Appendix 1).

Below is a satellite image of the area with the yellow rectangle indicating part of the LRC forest land to be acquired into Sinharaja World Heritage Rainforest and the red ellipse indicating the area of the road construction. As can be seen from the satellite image, the LRC forest land forms a contiguous Rainforest with the protected Sinharaja World Heritage Rainforest. Headwaters of the Delgoda River which is connected to the Kukule Ganga originate within this forest. Protecting this Rainforest under Forest Conservation Department is the least we can do, save the bio-diversity and water resources for our future generations.



When we met with Forest Conservation Department senior officer in charge of Sinharaja land acquisition process Mr. Mahinda Seneviratne in December 2013, we were informed that most of the surveying and demarcation of the forest has been completed and the relevant documents have been submitted to the Ministry of Land for the acquisition. However, there have been no reports of progress since then. Delays to the process of LRC land acquisition into Sinharaja World Heritage Rainforest has also resulted in the famous "Morningside" of Sinharaja been heavily deforested. This deforestation is so large that the extent of damage is clearly visible through satellite images below.



<https://www.google.com/maps/place/Sinharaja+Forest+Reserve/@6.3976973,80.6089349,3192m/data=!3m1!1e3!4m2!3m1!1s0x3ae3e76bd109d45f:0x8c0ef1010649701b>

More than 10 years have passed since the original cabinet paper instructing LRC Forest lands to be annexed to Sinharaja, and 4 years passed since former Environment Minister Anura Priyadarshana Yapa instructing the relevant Ministries to do the same. We are still waiting for an official gazette notification by Government of Sri Lanka, declaring the above forested lands protected as part of Sinharaja World Heritage Rainforest. This lack of political will has created grounds for further deforestation and major conflicts to arise again in this region. Therefore, we would like to request the above matter be expedited as quickly as possible as part of the 100 day program since as to our knowledge the surveying and demarcation has already been completed and the final process seem to be taking too long at Ministry of Land.

2. Deforestation of privately held forests near Sinharaja World Heritage Rainforest and the Rakwana Hills

A considerable amount of ecologically rich rainforests near Sinharaja have moved to private ownership due to fraudulent transactions during previous regimes as well as being released by LRC or given by GOSL through gazette extraordinary. These rainforests are rapidly being cleared for various projects, logging, and tea / palm oil plantations. As a result, water streams have dried up in certain areas and recently Rakwana residents staged a protest calling to halt the deforestation in Rakwana hills (See photos below and Appendix 2). In 2002, Professor Nimal Gunatilleke of University of Peradeniya, requested the Rakwana-Deniyaya forest hills be protected due to its rich bio-diversity (Appendix 3). Privately held inholdings within Rainforests in this region, such as the Pannila Reserve and the clearings on such inholdings have caused many issues and protests by the affected villagers (Appendix 4). Forest Conservation Department has been unable to take action as they do not have jurisdiction over these forests. Due to a lack of proper government strategy to address this issue, no action has been taken so far, creating both an environmental and social crisis.



Rakwana residents protesting deforestation in Rakwana hills that has caused streams to dry out (April 2014).

3. So what can be done in the 100-days?

(i) Expedite the acquisition of 2,500 hectares of LRC forest land into Sinharaja for which the Forest Conservation Department has already surveyed the land.

(ii) Form a committee to look into the deforestation of ecologically rich privately held lands near Sinharaja and Rakwana-Deniyaya hills (Appendix 3) with the goal of coming up with a comprehensive plan to protect these Rainforests for the future generations.

4. What can be done in the long run

(i) Complete the acquisition of 2,500 hectares of LRC forest land into Sinharaja through publication of Gazette.

(ii) Execute a comprehensive plan to protect the privately held Rainforests near Sinharaja and Rakwana-Deniyaya hills. A joint initiative between Land Ministry and Forest Conservation Department is recommended.

We need to protect Sinharaja World Heritage Rainforest and surrounding unprotected Rainforests. Every possible measure should be taken to prevent deforestation and protect this ecologically rich area to save our water streams and ensure we leave enough natural resources for our future generations. Provided enough commitment and resources, the tasks given above are easily achievable. We hope you will act in a timely manner to address this serious issue before it is too late.

Thank you

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Appendix

1. Greenlight for Sinharaja footpath

<http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2011/12/04/new40.asp>

2. UNESCO produced landuse map of Sinharaja IBR indicating the footpath within the buffer zone
(Location of the road construction issue and area proposed to be annexed to Sinharaja Rainforest)

<http://www.rainforestprotectors.org/rainforest/knowledgebank/maps/Sinharaja%20Land%20Use%20Map.jpg>

3. Rakwana-Deniyaya hills - a plea for the conservation

<http://archives.dailynews.lk/2002/08/01/fea07.html>

4. Pannila residents demonstrate over alleged timber racket

<http://newsfirst.lk/english/2014/04/area-residents-stage-demonstration-alleged-timber-racket-pannila-reserve/29891>