Footpath in Sinharaja, blown out of proportion

BY CHANDESI YATHARASA

Sandwiched between the need of villagers and biodiversity conservation, the road construction near the Sinharaja Forest Reserve has been a topic of the local environment circle. "We are ready to have a discussion with genuine environmentalists and conservationists, yet we are cautious not to give any chance to 'environment terrorists'," Environment Minister Anura Priyadarshana Yapa said in an interview with Sunday Observer.

The Minister said it was his duty of a responsible Government to upgrade the living standards of the people. Following are the excerpts of the interview with Minister Anura Priyadarshana Yapa.

Q: What is the current situation of the investigation you have instructed into the road construction in Sinharaja?

A: The story which goes round saying that there is a road constructed inside the Sinharaja Forest Reserve is totally false.

According to the information we have received what had happened was that a foot path the villagers have used for nearly a century has been upgraded. This is not a new road. Opposing environmentists have the mistaken idea that it is a road constructed inside the Sinharaja Forest Reserve.

This problem cropped up during the environment and development work started in a road in the village already there and people were using it for generations. The footpath was through an old abandoned estate which is under the Land Reclamation Commission. Part of the estate has been under cardamom cultivation and another part with tea and a part has been used as a forest.

Today, abandoned for nearly a century, it is now grown with forest. Considering all these factors we have invited a team of experts to investigate into the issue and they are already at the site gathering information and evaluating the present situation.

Q: Why wasn’t the Environment Ministry informed about the road construction close to Sinharaja?

A: There is no need. If the road construction is not in the Sinharaja reserve there is no need for the Environment Ministry to be informed. We cannot obstruct expansion of our living areas. Part of this road has been earlier registered under the Pradeshiya Sabha according to the information we have. So the area has never been developed. It is a route which we use for nearly a century and it is not new.

The paragraph 14 of article 27 in the Chapter 6 of the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka has declared that the State shall protect, preserve and improve the environment for the benefit of the community indicating the highest priority that the country’s legislation has to attach to the Environmental Authority under the Ministry of Environment for the benefit of the community. Meanwhile the Chairman of the Central Environment Authority Charitha Herath said that under the Environment Ministry’s instruction, the Central Environment Authority, jointly with the Department of Forest Conservation has sent an expert team to investigate and reveal the truth.

Herath said that they are looking into all the aspects of the subject and the information they have sent to the Ministry of Environment.

Q: What is the current situation of the investigation?

A: Based on the final revisions of the investigation which has been completed whether and to what extent the road construction will affect the biodiversity of the area and whether the upgrade could be done without damaging the environment.

The Environment Minister would finally give the solution based on the findings and evaluations the expert team would forward.

Q: What is happening at the Kaukola Mountain Range?

A: There is no approval given by the Central Environment Authority to cut trees in this area. The Government does not grant trees specifically to cut down on nature in order to get timber.

We cannot tell people to live without any development. We do agree returning to a simple lifestyle is more environment friendly. But can we stop people from embracing the development trends in the world? As a responsible Government it is our duty to upgrade the living standards of the people of the country. On the other hand, conservation itself is not an environment protection law.

Minister Anura Priyadarshana Yapa

Charitha Herath

criticised by environmentists. How do you see this situation?

A: We are ready to have discussion with genuine environmentalists and conservationists but we are cautious not to give any chance to 'environment terrorists' that would damage the country’s reputation and the national development drive. The entire world is driving towards sustainable development.

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There are standards and criteria to adhere to when cutting down trees on Government lands and estates. There is separate Management Committee in the Planation Services Ministry and this committee needs to approve this action and request given to the environmental issues.

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