

# A REAL RURAL REVOLUTION

Mr. A. A. Wijetunge, Secretary Ministry of Lands, Irrigation and Mahaweli Development and Chairman of the Presidential Task Force on Land Utilisation and Distribution in a discussion with *The Economic Review* looks at the main factors affecting land distribution.

Sri Lanka currently is in the unique situation of having a population exactly equal to the total land mass of the country - 16 million acres for 16 million people. And land is also in the relatively unusual form of state control - mainly due to the policy under colonial rule and also the Land Reform Acts of 1972 and 1975.

Though 2.29 million acres of state land has been redistributed between 1935 and 1985 this was done without adequate planning. 505,438 acres of these had been regularisation of encroachments. We have always had a fairly high level of encroachments of state owned land because landlessness is and has been an acute problem. According to a survey done in 1982 27% of the peasant households in Sri Lanka are landless.

All the land reform programmes implemented by successive governments paid scant attention to the redistribution aspect. Thus apart from regularising encroachments no serious attempt was made to tackle the problem of landlessness. Unless due attention is paid to this problem all our efforts at development, eliminating poverty and unemployment and raising the standard of living of our people will become abysmal

failures. That's why a new land reform programme which will give priority to the re-distribution aspect is of crucial importance today.

The "Presidential Task Force on Land Utilization and Distribution" will try to do this in two ways. Firstly the Task Force will identify and distribute state land that can be used for cultivation and other purposes. Secondly all private land remaining uncultivated will be handed over to the landless for cultivation. These two measures would amount to a revolutionary change which will go a long way in solving the problem of landlessness, increasing production and improving the well being of our people.

The Task Force has identified 3 categories of landless groups - peasant families, plantation workers and public servants. Land will be redistributed mainly for three purposes - agriculture, housing and cottage industries.

After the completion of the necessary preliminary measures the Task Force hopes to redistribute one million acres of land. This would include 500,000 acres of state owned land and 700 acres of Land Reform Commission (LRC) owned paddy land worked by 'ande cultivators'. I must mention that this is indeed a unique situation - a land reform commission having ande cultivators is an indicator of the flaws in our earlier land reform programmes. The Task Force has already ordered the LRC to give these land to the ande cultivators. In addition this will include 35,000 acres of Mahaweli highlands.

Our efforts will not stop at alienation. The Task Force will take steps to provide the beneficiaries with the

necessary extension services, expert advice, input supplies and marketing services. Allocation and the follow up measures will be carried out according to a well thought out plan.

The first task is to identify the land which can be distributed and to identify the boundaries. Already 550 surveyors are engaged in this task. Each surveyor is expected to identify 200 allotments per month. After the task is over land kachcheries will be formed and applications will be called for. Since land is a devolved subject Provincial Councils will play a major role in this process.

Land distribution and the supply of extension services should be done in such a way so as not to encourage the formation of a dependency at all levels of this programme. One method of this would be to have a few model farmers - a method which is being carried out very successfully in the Mahaweli settlement areas. This participatory objective is very important because through this reform programming we are attempting to look after certain segments of society who are totally affected. This is not a political gimmick but a revolutionary measure to help eradicate landlessness, poverty and unemployment. People know that state owns a large area of land and thus will give their support to any attempt to distribute this land among the needy. Peoples participation will also ensure that this land is distributed equitably and justly.

Since the land that will be distributed is scattered throughout the country it will not be possible to have a single definite unit of allocation. It will which the land will be put. For example in the up-country in an area like Nuwara Eliya the unit

Continued on page 32

Continued from page 4

of allocation for agriculture will be 1/2 acre. But in the other wet zone areas this will be 1 - 2 acres, in the dry zone 2 - 5 acres. The unit will also vary according to the kind of crop that will be cultivated.

As for uncultivated land, supervision orders will be issued by the commissioner of Agrarian Services to the owners of neglected land. Guidelines and advice would also be given on suitable crops and requires important supervision. If the recommended measures are not implemented and the land remains uncultivated and under-utilised even after six months, these lands will be taken over and redistributed among those who will put it to best use. It is estimated that his scheme would cover over a million private holdings.

A large percentage of land to be allocated is in the temporarily merged North-Eastern Province. This land will be distributed among the landless peasants and other target groups living in these areas. This is not a colonization scheme and thus we will take utmost care not to change the ethnic compositions in these areas.

We expect various non governmental organisation to play a major role in this programme specially in the selection process. They can ensure that the selection is just, fair and that no political interferences are made. They can also help to provide the necessary services after process and act as watch dogs on behalf of the people. They can also take the lead in organising the farmers.