

Voting at national elections Provide facilities for 'internal' migrant workers,' Govt told

By LEON BRENGER

A leading polls watchdog called on the authorities to set up an advance voting system for internal migrant workers at their respective workplaces, ahead of the forthcoming General Elections slated for March or April, since it is a legitimate right for every individual to cast his/her vote at a national election.



"There could be something like 300,000 or even more workers who have been disenfranchised at previous elections largely owing to work commitments and other issues and therefore, there should be a change in thinking towards this end.

Provide facilities...

This group is made up largely of personnel attached to the country's health sector, election observers, Media personnel, private security personnel and the list goes on," Rohana Hettiarachchi with the People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL) said.

He added that election observers have been raising this issue for the past 15 years with the Election Chair and related authorities, but the response has been poor on all sides.

He said that the most

affected are those embedded in the industrial zones, where production machines are operated on a 24-hour basis, and therefore, they need to be manually manned during this period.

"The authorities should seriously consider setting up some sort of mechanism for advance voting, mainly at high level national elections, simply because even a small number could make a difference in the final count, as was the case in the 2005 Presidential Election, that was decided by a mere 125,000-plus votes.

This voting mechanism should also be later extended to the estimated two million Lankan migrant workers scattered around 16 countries, as well as to prisoners held in jails throughout the country," Hettiarachchi pointed out.

He added that some 3,500 Maldivians were provided with a facility to vote through their Mission in Colombo, at the last major elections held in the Indian Ocean archipelago in April 2019.

He said that the matter had also been raised with the Chair of the Election Commission,

Mahinda Deshapriya, and the response had been very positive.

However, a final decision towards this end will have to be made through a Court ruling or by an act of Parliament, Hettiarachchi further said.

Earlier, a group of trade union representatives had also met up with the Election Chair, to discuss the same issue, and the meeting ended on a positive tone. President of the National Union of Seafarers Sri Lanka (NUSS), Palitha Atukorale, said.

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