No proper coordination between the agencies in taking action regarding the Express Pearl disaster – SOC on Environment

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The Sectoral Oversight Committee on Environment, Natural Resources & Sustainable Development inquired the progress made in providing compensation due to the Express Pearl disaster and further seeking the support of the expert committee appointed by Marine Environment Protection Authority (MEPA) to assess the damages.

This was discussed when the committee met in Parliament recently under the chairmanship of Member of Parliament Hon. Ajith Mannapperuma.

The MEPA officials said that although they had asked the Attorney General's Department in a letter about the activities of the expert committee appointed by MEPA and its future needs, they had not received a proper reply. However, the officials said that they had received information from the Ministry of Justice that an international, independent expert committee would be appointed to continue the assessment of the damages. As a result, the MEPA expert committee has not made a firm decision on how to proceed further, the MEPA officials said. Also, they pointed out that it is a problem that their institution is not aware of the work being carried out in this regard by the Attorney General's Department.

It was revealed in the committee that since the payments related to the research activities carried out by the expert committee appointed by MEPA have not been made, the Ministry has been informed to submit a cabinet paper to look into the ability to make payments. It was also disclosed that no appointments have been made to the expert committee for the year 2023.

Prof. Ajith De Alwis, co-chairman of the expert committee appointed by MEPA, who participated in the committee, said that the relevant universities have been questioned regarding his educational qualifications. The Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption has inquired about the appointment and the educational qualifications of two members appointed to the expert committee, the MEPA officials told the committee.

The attention of the committee was focused on the issues that have arisen due to the lack of good coordination between the Marine Environmental Protection Authority, the Ministry of Fisheries and the Attorney General's Department. Due to this, it was revealed before the committee that several issues have arisen for the compensation of fishermen. Accordingly, the Committee Chair instructed that the Attorney General's Department, the Ministry of Fisheries, the MEPA and the members of the expert committee appointed by MEPA jointly prepare a program and submit a related report to the Committee.

Also, since the disaster caused by this ship incident is the biggest destruction caused by microplastics in the world, the committee decided to seek the approval of the Cabinet of Ministers for the research of the expert committee and to provide facilities for the same.

Members of Parliament Hon. (Dr.) Thilak Rajapakse, Hon. Akila Ellawala, Hon. Waruna Liyanage and

Hon. Nalaka Bandara Kottegoda as well as officials of the Marine Environment Protection Authority, Ministry of Urban Development and Housing were present in the committee meeting.