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Farmers protest against airport expansion

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SALEM: Tension prevailed as hundreds of farmers and their family members laid a siege to the Salem collectorate on Friday to protest land acquisition for airport expansion in the city.

M Shivakumar, a farmer and one of the protesters, said, "We don't have any option other than agriculture." Shivakumar owns seven acres of land adjacent to the airport. He said agriculture was the only source for his family to earn money.

Another farmer K Sumathi said that agriculture was the only occupation for them. "We don't know any other occupation other than agriculture," she said.

The villages surrounding the airport such as Pottiyapuram, Sikkanampatty, Kamalapuram and other six villages have fertile lands. Initially, the airport was started with 160 acres of land at Kamalapuram near Omalur in 1993. The length of the runway is about 6,000 ft and flights such as ATR-72, B-737-200 type can be landed easily. The airport also equipped with apron to park two aircrafts at a time.

The ministry of civil aviation (MoCA) has taken efforts for expanding the airport after connecting the airport under the regional connectivity scheme (RCS). The MoCA needed additional of 570 acres to expand the airport. "If we get that additional 570 acre lands, we could lay runways up to 8,000 sqft to accommodate Boeing aircrafts," said an official from Salem Airport, refusing to quote his name. He said warehouse and providing hanger services to provide maintenance to aircrafts would be set up in 100 acres.

When the Salem district administration initiated formalities to acquire lands, the farmers and the residents strongly opposed. They also urged the district administration and chief minister Edappadi K Palaniswami to drop land acquiring activity even as they were assured of huge amount of compensation. The officials assured the land owners and the farmers that they would give four times of money than the government's guideline value. "But, we are not struggling for money and we protesting to save our livelihood," the farmers said.