

Three Tamil fishermen killed in northern Sri Lanka

Our correspondent
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The following on-the-spot-report on the deaths of three fishermen in Jaffna in the North of Sri Lanka was submitted to the World Socialist Web Site . The Sri Lankan security forces, in their protracted war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), have turned the area into an armed camp, making it difficult and dangerous for working people to make a living. The article provides a glimpse of the draconian security measures in force in the area.

Kanagiah Sivayogalingam, 39, of the Kayts electorate, was killed by an electric shock from a naval force barbed wire fence around the Sri Lankan Navy base. He was the president of the local fishermen's co-operative society and the father of six children.

On July 22, he set out as usual from his house situated at Velanai, heading west for his fishing area. He reached the navy checkpoint situated at Thurairr around 5.30 am, handed over his national identity card issued by the registrar of persons, and obtained a flag with No. 49-31 to be hoisted on his fishing boat. He then began his journey to the fishing grounds in the Pungudutivu Suruvil Sea.

Following the day's fishing, Sivayogalingam sent his catch with an assistant to a rural fish market and was returning home with his fishing net and other equipment. The route near the naval base is very narrow and its fences are constructed of barbed wire. His net became entangled in the barbed wire and, not knowing the fence was electrified, he tried to free it.

His assistant said Sivayogalingam then cried out in agony. "I tried to find out why he was shouting like this. He got caught in the barbed wire fence and was unable to get out," he said later. Naval security ordered people not to touch him. They disconnected the power supply, but Sivayogalingum collapsed and became unconscious. He was taken to nearby Kayts Hospital,

but died later that day.

The navy immediately began to claim that the fisherman had died of a heart attack, not electric shock. Authorities even approached Sivayogalingum's wife to see if he was suffering from heart disease, but she denied that he had such a condition. Local fishermen insisted that the corpse be taken to the Jaffna teaching hospital for a post-mortem inquiry. Many of the fishermen who witnessed the incident came forward to give evidence, despite threats by the armed forces.

Immediately after his funeral, naval officials went to Sivayogalingum's house and asked for the copy of the inquiry into his death, but his wife stated that she had not been issued a copy.

Sivayogalingum's assistant said he and others had been subjected to many threats by the armed forces. They asked him why he had given evidence, and forced him to sign their recorded notes.

Threats against the local fishermen intensified on August 1. As they passed the navy checkpoint, they were told they were prohibited from fishing. A naval officer told them: "You all must co-operate with us. Don't think he died of electric shock. Nothing of the sort ever happened."

Tensions in the fishing villages have increased. On August 11, navy forces shot and killed two more fishermen in the Gurunagar Sea, near Jaffna town. The two were Sebastianpillai Vincent Jeyakumar, 36, a father of six, and Anthonypillai Christhuratah, 45. The bodies were handed over to the Jaffna hospital by the Kayts police.

The deaths are the result of increasingly repressive measures taken against fishermen on the pretext of preventing LTTE activities, although the government forces have been unable to substantiate any connection between the fisherman and the LTTE. According to a

report in the *Tamil Daily*, fishermen have been asked to keep their fishing boats very close to the shore. They must hoist the number issued to them by the armed forces so that the number is readable from far away. Fishermen who anchor their boats at Colombuthurai and Navanthurai face harassment.

In addition, the armed forces are taking a major portion of fish caught and selling them by means of their henchmen among the fish traders to earn large sums of money. They have also organised to make dry fish from the hauls seized from local fishermen, who receive nothing.

A report from Velanai stated that a naval officer, Ratnayake, has been approaching the fish auctioneer daily with confiscated crab, lobster and other rare varieties of seafood. The armed forces also force fishermen to sell their fish for lower prices. Fishermen have made a number of complaints to the Assistant Government Agent (civil officer) and other officers of the local bodies.

According to fishermen who spoke to our correspondent, the Eelam Peoples Democratic Front, an armed group working with the security forces, is also involved. In rural villages like Thambatty, EPDF personnel "purchased" dry fish in 1998 for 58,000 rupees (US\$830) but have paid nothing to the local fishermen's co-operative society.

Since the mid-1980s, deep sea fishing for fishermen from Gurungar, Myliddy, Pooneryn, Paasairur and Mannar has been badly affected. All fish lorries from Mannar have been banned. As a result many fishermen are living below the poverty line. In addition, a fishing boat factory at Karainagar has virtually closed, resulting in the loss of more than 200 jobs.

Just recently the security forces have imposed another indignity on local fishermen. Under the pretext of preventing arms smuggling, a military order has banned fishermen from going about their work dressed in shorts, shirts or any other clothes. Instead they are compelled to dress only in loin cloths.



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