

Report from a Sri Lankan fishing village—Part One

Fisherman killed in collision with Sri Lankan naval boat

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Following the death of a Tamil fisherman in a collision with a naval vessel on January 24, World Socialist Web Site reporters went to the fisherman's village of Udappuva and spoke to villagers about the circumstances of the incident, the living conditions they face and the history of repression in the area by the police and military.

Kandiah Sivakunar, a 54-year-old father of four, was killed when a Sri Lankan navy boat rammed his vessel. His death underscores the harsh conditions facing many Tamil fishing villages. The problems facing fishermen seeking to make a living in difficult and sometimes dangerous circumstances have been compounded by systematic harassment from the security forces engaged in the country's long running war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Arivin Selvarasa, who was on the boat with Kandiah and survived, explained what happened to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters. On the night of January 24, he and Kandiah were fishing in deep water near their village of Udappuva on the northwest coast of Sri Lanka. Selvarasa, 39, owned the boat and Kandiah, 54, was his offsider. Suddenly a large high-speed naval vessel came out of the dark and crashed into their fiberglass fishing boat smashing it to bits and throwing the two fishermen into the sea.

Selvarasa and Kandiah hung on to pieces of the boat and appealed for help. The navy personnel after observing them for few minutes took off, leaving the fishermen to their fate. Selvarasa was able to reach another boat after swimming for an hour and a half but Kamiah could not swim and drowned. He was a father of four children and the sole breadwinner in the family.

On the morning of January 25, Selvarasa,

accompanied by other fishermen, complained to the police about the incident but the police ignored them and failed to launch a search for the missing fisherman. That was left to people in the area who, using some 40 boats, found Kandiah's body after two days searching and handed it over to the police. A postmortem has been held but no official verdict on the death has been delivered.

On January 26, three naval officers came to the village to inquire about the incident and questioned Selvarasa. The following day another two officers again met Selvarasa and asked whether he had had a light on the boat. Like other fishermen, Selvarasa and Kandiah had a kerosene lantern. The navy tried to convince the villagers that the collision was an accident caused by the lack of proper lighting on the fishing boat. The naval vessel, it says, had no lights because it was involved in a "surveillance" patrol.

The fishermen are concerned that the collision was deliberate and aimed at intimidating them into not going to sea at all. "Navy men told us that it was wrong and they will look into it. The navy promised that they would consider providing an engine and a boat as well as compensation for Kandiah's family. The Deputy Minister of Fisheries also visited and promised a solution. However, nothing has happened," people complained. "We are not bothered about the boat. We are not worried about the lost engine. Why did the navy ignore the fishermen's cries for help? Why, after having seen the fisherman, did they just leave?"

Others added: "We are in fear of going to fish. Navy boats are patrolling every day. If we see a navy vessel we have to stop our boats. If not they may attack us with wires." One of the fishermen, Selvanayagam, said:

“After this incident people are nervous. On one occasion, when they heard the sound of one of our own boats, they hurried to the shore even abandoning their fishing nets.”

Fishermen in the north and east of Sri Lanka face severe restrictions as a result of the ongoing war between the Sri Lankan military and the LTTE. In order to prevent the LTTE from smuggling arms into the island, the navy has imposed tight security, particularly on the north and east. In some areas, fishing is either totally or partially banned, leaving already-poor fishermen completely destitute.



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