

Sri Lankan fishermen pressured to end protests during ceasefire talks

Our correspondent
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Fishermen on the Jaffna peninsula in northern Sri Lanka were compelled last month to end eight days of protests against the military's severe restrictions on their fishing activities. The Northern Fishermen Co-operative Union (NFCU) shut down the campaign on February 6 in the lead-up to the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding by the government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for a ceasefire in the country's long-running civil war.

The ban has destroyed the livelihoods of thousands of Tamil fishermen in the coastal areas of the Northern and Eastern provinces as well as some adjoining areas. Under the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), the LTTE agreed to the government's demand that the harsh restrictions remain in place for a further three months, despite calls by the fishermen to lift them immediately. The NFCU's decision to call off the campaign is the first clear case of the subordination of a struggle by working people to the requirements of the agreement between Colombo and the LTTE.

The protest began on January 30 when around 1,500 fishermen along with their families and supporters began to picket the Jaffna secretariat—the main provincial administrative centre in Jaffna town—to demand an end to the ban on fishing in coastal areas. The protesters came from a number of nearby towns, including Kolomburthurai, Pasaur and Navanthurai, as well as from Point Pedro and Velvatithurai, some 25km away.

On February 4, Sri Lanka's independence day, the picketers prevented the national flag from being hoisted at the secretariat and barred officials from entering the offices. Instead they raised a black flag as a mark of protest and in doing so defied the advice of T. Maheshwaran, a minister in the United National Party (UNP)-led coalition government.

The campaign began to rally wider support on the Jaffna peninsula for their demands. Dock workers at the Point Pedro harbour stopped work in support of the fishermen and several social organisations backed their demands. Both the LTTE and the Colombo government wanted an end to the protests, which threatened to cut across the terms of the MoU being hammered out in private by Norwegian facilitators.

On February 6, army officers held a closed-door meeting at the Palaly army base with representatives of the NFCU and other organisations involved in the protest with a view to shutting the campaign down. The Sri Lankan military authorities claim that the ban is necessary for security reasons to prevent arms smuggling and attacks by the LTTE on military bases. In reality, the restrictions form part of the repressive security arrangements that have been in force on the peninsula for years to harass and intimidate the largely Tamil population.

In the discussions, the army spokesmen agreed only to allow limited access to the Vadamarachchi coastal zone for four hours between 4am and 8am. The zone, located off the northern areas of the Jaffna Peninsula, contains major fishing grounds that traditionally have supported thousands of fishing families. The military officials also insisted that there be a week-long "observation period," during which a committee formed by the NFCU and other organisations will police the restrictions. The army retained the option of reimposing the blanket ban if the restrictions are breached or any "security problems" arise.

When informed that the NFCU representatives had agreed to the proposals, the fishermen picketing outside the Jaffna secretariat building responded angrily. "We are starving here. What are they talking about in secrecy? Our struggle has been betrayed," they

shouted. Under pressure from the fishermen, a few NFCU branch leaders also expressed their disagreement with the decision.

On the same day, representatives of Tamil National Alliance (TNA), an alliance of Tamil bourgeois parties that supports the government, met with Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe as well as members of the army, navy and air force top brass. The results of those discussions were a further restriction of the fishing area and times. The hours have been reduced to the period between 4.30am and 6.30am. During weekdays, the fishermen are not permitted to go beyond 500m from the shore and, on the weekend, up to 1,500m.

“Both of them, the union leaders and the TNA, acted as the agents for the government and not for us,” the fishermen at the picket explained.

Significantly, the Jaffna University Student Front, an organisation known for its pro-LTTE sympathies, came down on the side of the NFCU leadership, the TNA, the government and the army. The organisation warned the protesting fishermen not to act as disruptive forces to the talks being prepared between the LTTE and the government.

A fisherman told our reporters: “For the past six months we have not had any income due to this ban. We cannot send our children to school. We are not even able to get medical treatment when we get ill, as we have no money. The government gives some relief but it is not enough for us. If we are allowed to do our job, we don’t want this relief.

“After the announcement of the recent ceasefire, the army and the LTTE are able to move freely in both areas controlled by them without any problem. Why is it only us who have no right to do so?”

He also vented his anger at the contempt shown by politicians to workers. “As we have no regular jobs, we work at Point Pedro harbour unloading cargo. Minister Maheshwaran in his recent visit to the harbour asked us not to use hooks in unloading sugar bags shipped for his company. But if we handle those cargoes without hooks our hands will be wounded. See the state of our hands,” he said showing us his hands.

A member of the Vadamarachchi Fishermen’s Co-operative Union was quick to cite another incident involving the same politician and harbour workers. “We organised a march to press for a solution to our problems 45 days before the elections last December.

Maheshwaran visited us and promised: ‘If you all vote for the UNP we will solve your problems within two days of our rule.’ But when we met him after the election and reminded him of his promise, he replied: ‘We got only 800 votes from the area, so you better go and ask those you voted for to resolve your problem.’”

This week, while easing the ban in some areas, the Sri Lankan military authorities have announced further restrictions on fishing in the Vadamarachchi coastal zone. Fishermen are banned from any area within one kilometre of an army base or other military installations and are only permitted to use small motors—up to 15 horsepower—on their boats.

The suppression of the protests by Jaffna fishermen is an indication of things to come. The signing of the MoU is the first stage of a lengthy process of negotiations between the government and the LTTE aimed at securing a settlement to the war. The willingness of the LTTE to sacrifice the livelihoods of ordinary fishermen to its dealings with Colombo is a warning that any peace deal will seek to consolidate the mutual interests of the Sinhala and Tamil ruling elites at the expense of the working class.



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