

Sri Lankan navy kills two fishermen

23 May 2002

The Sri Lankan Defence Ministry reported on May 2 that the navy had intercepted two trawlers, suspected of carrying arms for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), off the country's east coast in the Batticaloa district. One vessel "blew itself up" and the navy chased the other, which mingled with smaller civilian fishing boats. "Suddenly LTTE boats sprang from inside the cluster of civilian boats and opened fire at the naval boats. Naval troops engaged these LTTE boats resulting in the destruction of one LTTE boat which engaged them." The trawler sped off.

Colombo newspapers immediately leapt on the incident as proof that the LTTE was breaching the ceasefire arrangement reached in February. The Defence Ministry made a formal complaint to the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) led by Norway. With a SLMM official on board, the navy returned to the area and recovered boxes of weapons. Defence Minister Tilak Marapona insisted that the weapons were destined for the LTTE. The LTTE, however, denied any involvement.

WSWS reporters visited Vakara in Batticaloa district and spoke to local fishermen, the district monitoring mission chief and ordinary people about the incident. Neither the navy, the government, the Colombo media nor the monitoring mission reported that two men had been killed in the naval attack on "LTTE boats" that "suddenly sprang from inside the cluster of civilian boats". The victims were fishermen, not LTTE fighters.

Noor Mohamed Naseer, 24, who escaped from the attack, explained to us: "Our boat owner, Mohamed Thampi Sabeek, Athambaba Velai Thampi and myself were fishing in the evening of the fateful day near Salli Thivu [the area of sea near Valachchanai].

"While we were waiting after spreading the fishing net, four naval gunboats came around our boat at about 6.30 pm and aimed a red flash light at us. Then the navy started shooting at us. Athambaba died on the spot. Sabeek and myself jumped into the sea and swam

to escape. A navy vessel came toward us and started to shoot again. Sabeek was injured in one arm and a bullet hit my leg. We continued to swim while bleeding until the following morning. Sabeek told me he couldn't swim further. I too was very tired and was not in a position to help him."

Next day Naseer was able to reach Kayankeni, an LTTE-controlled area, where he received medical assistance. Sabeek perished at sea. Naseer met another 36 fishermen who managed to flee there after escaping the navy attack. Sixteen of them were Sinhalese, while others were Muslims and Tamils. Most were from Puttalam on the west coast, and others were from the eastern district of Trincomalee.

Naseer explained that before the attack on their boat, they had noticed a boat exploding in the distance. He did not know anything about either of the trawlers being pursued by the navy and insisted that he and his two dead friends were not LTTE fighters. All three were poor fishermen. Both Athambaba and Sabeek have families who now have no breadwinner and have to rely on help from relatives.

Batticaloa SLMM chief Heikki Hulkkonen told us that the LTTE had informed him of 36 fishermen who had arrived in area under its control—one wounded. "The navy says they attacked boats smuggling LTTE arms. The LTTE has denied the accusation. There are two sides to the story. Our Trincomalee team is investigating it. They have found some ammunition in the sea where incident took place. We can't come to a conclusion but we have to watch the situation carefully."

While Hulkkonen was reluctant to take any definite stance, he did admit that killing local fishermen was a violation of the ceasefire arrangements. "I feel that beyond the government and the LTTE, there may be groups who are against the peace process who might have been involved in this incident," he said. Hulkkonen did not elaborate but he is undoubtedly

aware that sections of the military are hostile to the “peace process” and would seize on any opportunity to sabotage negotiations.

In mid-May, the SLMM issued a formal statement exonerating the military. The navy had “executed its legitimate task in intercepting the suspected trawlers,” it declared, adding that it had proved one of the trawlers was illegally carrying arms. The mission, however, stated that “no finding linked the trawlers to any of the parties”—leaving open the main question as to whose boat and arms were involved. The statement concluded that there had therefore been no ceasefire violation. No mention was made of the two dead fishermen.

The working class and poor in Sri Lanka have been the hardest hit by the 19-year civil war and their plight is continuing under the ceasefire. In Valachchanai, where Noor Mohamed Naseer lives, about 90 percent of the population eke out a living through fishing and rice cultivation. There are 300 boats but around 7,000 men involved in fishing. Nearly 100 people from the area have died as a result of the war, including 50 fishermen—some due to attacks by the navy.

A cousin of Sabeek, one of the two dead men, told us: “People from our area were in the forefront in forming the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress [a Muslim communal party]. Now they have abandoned us. I think it is because our people are poor. The SLMC leaders are with the big people. Our parliamentarian, Mohaideen Abdul Kader, also the Deputy Minister of Fisheries, visited us and promised to hand over the bodies of the fishermen who died in the attack. But he later told us that the bodies were not found. The LTTE does not attack our boats, but they do demand money.”

A Muslim peasant explained: “There are 40,000 acres of arable land in this Kalkuda electorate but only 20 acres have been cultivated. We have given up due to the pressure from both sides. After the ceasefire agreement, the LTTE asked us to start cultivating. But we would have to travel 15 or 20 km. We are still not going there because we are not certain about the peace process. If the ceasefire is broken then we will not be able to go there, look after our crops and harvest. We have been suffering for nearly two decades without cultivation.”

There are daily reports of harassment by the Sri Lankan security forces and at the same time complaints that the LTTE is levying taxes and intimidating its

opponents. Expressing the prevailing pessimism, one person said: “At the moment we can go out and the situation has improved. However, how long this situation will prevail? We fear the war will erupt again.”



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