

Sri Lankan fishermen protest against LTTE attack

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Thousands of fishermen and their supporters at Gurunagar near Jaffna town in northern Sri Lanka protested at the beginning of the month against the actions of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in firing on their boats and making several arrests.

The demonstration was the largest public protest by ordinary people in the North against the LTTE, which is notorious for its ruthless suppression of any political opposition. The protest is a sign of growing discontent with the policies of the LTTE, which, since signing a ceasefire with the Colombo government in 2002, has failed to improve the living standards of the Tamil masses.

The protest was sparked by an incident on August 30. The LTTE fired on two trawlers engaged in fishing at sea near the Palavi-Poonahari area, 40 km from Jaffna town, injuring four fishermen and damaging the trawlers. Armed LTTE fighters arrested 10 fishermen, including the injured, and seized two trawlers.

The LTTE claimed that the fishermen from Gurunagar were operating in an area designated for other fishermen and for not heeding its orders to return to shore. The LTTE has arbitrarily demarcated these zones, which the fishermen say are a barrier to them earning a living.

About 4,000 angry fishermen stopped work on August 31 and September 1 and held a protest outside the LTTE's office in Gurunagar and the Fisheries Co-operative Union Federation, which is controlled by the LTTE. They demanded the release of the arrested fishermen and their trawlers and an end to the harassment. The Gurunagar fish market and shops were closed in a show of support for the demonstrators.

On September 1, hundreds of fishermen picketed the office of the Jaffna-based Tamil newspaper *Uthayan* to

protest at its misreporting of the incident. The pro-LTTE *Uthayan* reported shots being fired at the trawlers but failed to mention the LTTE. The protestors were demanding a correction be published.

Clearly worried by the protests, the LTTE released the fishermen and their trawlers. Normally it does not hesitate to mete out severe punishment—financial and physical—to anyone who fails to heed its orders. Fishermen face fines of 20,000 rupees (\$US2,000)—the equivalent of three months income—for fishing outside their designated areas.

In an effort to patch up the situation, the Gurunagar fisheries co-operative union invited the LTTE's Jaffna district political wing leader Ilamparithi and another LTTE official Sanymaster to attend a meeting on September 1. About 300 fishermen attended and angrily protested at the presence of LTTE leaders. "Who admitted these people to this meeting?" they yelled.

When Ilamparithi asked the name of one of the people in the audience, the fisherman defiantly retorted: "Why do you want my name? Do you want to pick me up in the night? Why at night, you can shoot me now!" Faced with a barrage of criticism, the LTTE leaders were forced to leave the meeting. They left declaring: "Those who shouted are not workers but anti-social and anti-national elements."

The following day, the LTTE's naval commander Soosai summoned the Gurunagar and Palavi fishermen to another meeting at Palavi. He admitted that the LTTE had shot at the trawlers and apologised but then blamed the fishermen for not heeding the LTTE's orders to stop.

Repeating the line of Ilamparithi, Soosai ominously warned the fishermen not to become the pawns of anti-social and anti-national elements. "Stop the agitations

and protests. We will not allow this type of agitation until our liberation war has ended. You were encouraged by some bad elements. They are agitating for regionalism between Jaffna and Vanni.”

Uthayan published an editorial echoing the same theme, blaming the protests on “some bad elements trying to discredit Tamil nationalism”. While trying to underplay the extent of support, the editorial also referred to “some elements advocating regional separation using the Gurunagar fishermen incident”.

This nervous reaction reveals an organisation in deep crisis. While the LTTE claims to be the “sole representative” of the Tamil people, there is profound and growing hostility among broad layers of the Tamil minority to its anti-democratic methods, its fines and taxes, and the appalling social conditions in areas under its control.

The LTTE is clearly worried at the prospect of another debilitating regional breakaway along the lines of the split earlier in the year between the northern and eastern wings of the organisation. More fundamentally, however, it fears the emergence of a movement of workers and the poor in defence of their class interests. The denunciations of the Gurunagar fishermen as “anti-national” and “anti-social” is the sharpest warning that the LTTE will stop at nothing—including thuggery and murder—to crush such opposition.

In September 2002, the LTTE’s present deputy political leader in Jaffna, Semmanan, issued death threats against members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Kayts who refused to hand over the funds of the Ampihainagar fishermen’s cooperative which they had formed and led. SEP member N. Kodeeswaran, who was the co-operative’s treasurer, was attacked by an LTTE member with a knife and hospitalised.

The Colombo media and the Sri Lankan military attempted to make some mileage out of the incident. Military spokesman Colonel Sumedha Perera told the press that the fishermen had stormed the LTTE fisheries office at Gurunagar and “chased away senior Tiger leaders”. Tamil fishermen are well aware, however, that the activities of the Sri Lankan navy have been every bit as repressive as those of the LTTE.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, an official with the Gurunagar fisheries co-operative official outlined the difficulties confronting fishermen. “The LTTE is dividing fishermen on a regional basis. They

instruct us to form a fisheries co-operative union on regional basis and allocate fishing areas,” he said. “Before 1989, we were able to go up to Katchchativu, a distant island, to fish. But when war intensified after 1990, the Sri Lankan navy harassed us, imposed rules and sometimes banned us from fishing. Now LTTE has imposed restrictions on us in areas they control.”

According to the Gurunagar fishermen, the LTTE recently imposed a new restriction that banned the use of trawlers in the Pallikuda, Palavi, Keerikuda, Walaipadu and Nachchikuda areas from December. The LTTE claims that trawlers damage the fishing nets used by local fishermen in these areas. Those operating the trawlers, however, are losing their livelihoods.

“Now, if we fish in other areas, the LTTE seizes our boats and anchors them at Nachchikuda for a month as a punishment and also imposes a fine. They claim the fine is for the loss incurred by others due to our fishing. There isn’t any security for our boats and equipment when they are captured. Even though it is difficult we have to stay to look after them,” one fisherman said.

Another fisherman pointed out that at Negombo (near Colombo) it is possible to fish at sea for weeks. But the Jaffna fishermen—both in LTTE- and government-controlled areas—are compelled to return on the same day. Previously the fisherman could go as far as Mannar and Pesalai where a kilogram of prawns would sell for 750 rupees. Now they have to sell their catch in Jaffna for 400 rupees a kilo to traders, sympathetic to the LTTE, who make substantial profits.

The protest at Gurunagar is simply one sign of the underlying discontent in the war zones of the North and East. The ceasefire may have silenced the guns but for most working people it is still a struggle to survive from day to day. This situation underscores the fact that the so-called peace process was never about helping the masses—Sinhala, Tamil or Muslim—but was aimed at securing a power-sharing arrangement between the LTTE and the government to intensify the exploitation of the working class.



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