

Sri Lankan military maintains fishing restrictions in the north

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29 June 2009

The Colombo media bogusly reported on June 20 that the Sri Lankan government had removed the decades-long, wartime fishing restrictions imposed on northern fisherman. The reports followed announcements by Basil Rajapakse, a key leader of the government, at a meeting with northern fishermen.

Rajapakse, who is President Mahinda Rajapakse's brother and chairman of the Presidential Task Force for resettlement, development and security in the Northern Province, told the fishermen that all restrictions would be lifted. At the same meeting, however, navy commander Vice Admiral Wasantha Karannagoda declared that certain restrictions would continue. The outcome demonstrates how far the military has asserted its authority over the government.

The fishermen's meeting was organised on June 19 as part of the government's campaign to boost the electoral fortunes of the ruling alliance, which is hated by Tamils following the government's ruthless communal war that ended just a month ago. The government is preparing to hold local council elections in the northern towns of Jaffna and Vavuniya on August 8 in order to provide a democratic façade for a permanent military occupation of the north.

The meeting was held at Thyagarajah School in Karainagar, a small islet connected to the Jaffna peninsula by a 4 kilometre-long road built through shallow water. Before the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) began in 1983, the islet was a booming fishing village where 7,000 families lived. There was a Norwegian-sponsored fishing vessel and a factory producing fishing gear. But the military took over the islet and converted it into a navy camp. About half the families fled the islet, leaving many houses abandoned or ruined.

Nearly 2,000 fishermen had been selected to attend the June 19 meeting from cooperative societies in fishing villages on the Jaffna peninsula. Participants were screened thoroughly and issued passes to attend. They were taken to the venue at about 7.30 am but had to wait until 10 am for the dignitaries to arrive.

Several government officials arrived, led by Basil Rajapakse, social services minister Douglas Devananda, deputy fisheries minister Nimal Perera, navy commander Karannagoda and northern area commander Somathilake Dissanayake. Among the others was National Freedom Front (NFF) leader Wimal Weerawansa. A defector from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Weerawansa has become a key

mouthpiece for the ruling alliance.

Fishermen's delegates presented several demands. They wanted removal of all the restrictions imposed on them, including the pass system, and freedom to fish seven days a week. Fishermen had long been banned from deep-sea fishing, could only fish four days a week and night fishing was prohibited from 7 pm to 5 am. Throughout the 25-year war, fishing was frequently banned altogether.

After hearing their demands, Rajapakse addressed the meeting, praising the armed forces for winning the war. He restated the government's claims that the war had been against terrorism but the Tamil masses, including the fishermen, know that it was a communal war unleashed against them.

Rajapakse declared the government would bring forth a "Spring of the North", just as it had created a "Dawn of the East" after the LTTE's defeat in the eastern province. In reality, just like the east, the north is now under an intensified military occupation. Nearly 300,000 civilians who fled the northern war zone in the final days of the war have been incarcerated in military-run detention camps.

The president's brother claimed that the government was seeking to unite the north and south by rebuilding the railway line that had been destroyed during the war. He accused unnamed newspapers in Jaffna of criticising the government and creating obstacles to the railway reconstruction. "Don't provoke us," he warned. Jaffna-based newspapers had reported that the government had ordered thousands of displaced people to vacate land they had occupied along the destroyed railway track.

(The result of Rajapakse's provocation was seen just four days later. Thugs grabbed several thousand copies of *Uthayan*, *Valampuri* and *Thinakkural* in Jaffna on June 24 and burned them. On Friday, *Uthayan* received a threatening letter, demanding that it shut down its office from July 1.)

Rajapakse made some comments on fish production that revealed the devastation caused by the war. In 1983, the fish catch in the north and east was 48,000 tonnes but has since declined to 2,800 tonnes. Rajapakse urged the fishermen to increase production and boost the country's revenue.

Then the president's brother began replying to the fishermen's questions. "You can fish not only four days a week but also 24 hours a

day,” he proclaimed. His remarks were greeted with applause. Rajapakse boasted: “You can go fishing up to the border of our country’s territorial waters. You can use fishing boats fitted with 8- to 15-horsepower engines. You can go deep water fishing and you can market fish to southern Sri Lanka through the A9 road [the main road linking the south to the north, which is still closed by the military].”

One person asked about subsidies for fishermen because they faced ongoing hardships. Rajapakse dismissed the demand, saying the government could not allocate subsidies because monies had to be spent resettling war refugees. At the same time, Rajapakse said nothing about the tens of thousands of people who had been displaced for more than a decade and driven from their properties to set up the military’s high security zones.

However, navy commander Karannagoda followed Rajapakse and dismissed his utterances about removing all restrictions on fishing. He declared: “The war has concluded but the terrorists have not been fully destroyed. Jaffna and island-based terrorists are still moving. Because of that, we have to take some further actions before allowing 24-hour fishing. We can’t remove the pass system. Fishing must start in places decided by the navy and fisherman must take the same route to return.”

On night fishing, Karannagoda said: “Those going fishing at 7 in the morning must come back at 7 in the evening. Those going fishing at 7 pm must come back the next morning at 7 am, and not before that. We are continuing our search operations for our defence.”

After the commander’s remarks, participants in the meeting became restless and started to ask questions. One fisherman objected: “He (Basil Rajapakse) told us we could fish 24 hours but this navy commander said we can fish only from the morning at 7 to 7 at night. We can’t understand this.” Another person exclaimed: “One is giving; the other one is taking back.” Navy personnel menacingly intervened to stop the commotion.

Only the government media was permitted to cover this and other meetings attended by Basil Rajapakse. The next day, the Jaffna media simply published the government’s false version, which said: “Jaffna peninsula fishermen allowed to fish 24 hours.”

It is not Rajapakse’s promise which is being implemented, but the navy commander’s order. When fishermen went fishing next day at one location, the navy officer said: “You must get a pass. You can do fishing from 4 am to 7 pm. You can’t fish close to navy camps.” When one fisherman cited what Rajapakse had said, the officer retorted: “We can’t allow 24-hour fishing. If you like, you can complain to the minister.”

In some areas, people have been allowed to fish at night but were not permitted to return until the morning, even if they become sick or are affected by heavy rains and wind. On Saturday, navy soldiers drove away fishermen at Velanai in Kayts, accusing them of fishing near a naval camp, when in fact they were fishing 400 metres away. On the same day, the navy chased fishermen near Gurunagar while they were collecting an expensive variety of shrimp.

The Jaffna peninsula is almost completely under the control of the

military, not the civil administration. It is the same across the entire northern and eastern provinces. Behind the Rajapakse government, the military is increasingly running society in the name of defending “national security”.

The fishermen’s meeting also revealed the seething discontent among the Tamil people after years of repression throughout the war. Several fishermen explained their problems to the WSWS and gave their views.

A Jaffna fisherman commented: “We are the most affected by restrictions on fishing. During the wartime most of us did not have jobs; we had to wait for government rations. There was not enough food and we couldn’t send our children to school. Even if the government removed all the restrictions, we have no boats and fishing gear suitable for deep-sea fishing. We are afraid to take out big loans because after the [local council] elections, the government could impose even greater restrictions, and we would be unable to repay the loans.”

A fisherman from Gurunagar said: “My family was displaced four times during the war. The first time was in 1987 when the Indian army invaded the north with the agreement of the Sri Lankan government. The second was in 1990 when another attack took place. In 1995, we fled to the Vanni because the Sri Lankan army re-captured all areas in Jaffna. In 1998 we came back, but in 2000 we were again displaced.

“After 1990 we lived in rented houses at several places. We had to leave the beachside because the navy took over about 600 fishermen’s houses to establish its high-security zone in Gurunagar. Some people fled to India.

“In the Vanni I shifted to Mulankavil near Mannar to do fishing. We got a loan from a LTTE bank, but I had to pay it back with big interest. The bank refused to give us any relief. We suffered at the hands of the government as well as the LTTE.”

The Gurunagar fisherman recounted a recent meeting called by social services minister Douglas Devananda, who leads the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party, which is part of the ruling coalition. “Workers confronted him. They asked: ‘Why you are with this murderous government?’ He tried to justify himself, saying that people could get something from the government if he were a member. But instead of getting anything, we have lost everything.”



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