

Sri Lankan fishermen forced back to work

Our correspondents
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Fishermen along the north-western coast of Sri Lanka have been compelled to return to fishing after protesting for two weeks to demand that the government withdraw a crippling fuel price increase. President Mahinda Rajapakse's government flatly rejected their demands and unleashed a police crackdown on their demonstrations.

Fishermen started the protests on February 13, blocking the highway from Kalpitiya to Negombo after the government raised fuel prices by up to 50 percent as part of an austerity program dictated by the International Monetary Fund. Other IMF conditions included devaluing the rupee, slashing government expenditure and increasing electricity charges and transport fares.

The government deployed hundreds of police and military personnel to break up the protests. On February 15, police fired live ammunition on about 4,000 demonstrators in Chilaw, killing fisherman Antony Warnakulasuriya and wounding three others.

Rajapakse and his ministers then launched a propaganda campaign to slander the fishermen as being part of an "international conspiracy to destabilise the country." Speaking to the state-owned *Sunday Observer* on February 26, Health Minister Maithripala Sirisena claimed that the hundreds of fishing families who had demonstrated in Chilaw were "not genuine fishermen." Sirisena insisted that the protest had been organised by a priest "who is also connected to the Katunayake Free Trade Zone incident."

These are blatant lies. The role of the Catholic priests in Chilaw was to hold back and contain the fishermen's struggle, doing everything possible to prevent it from

developing into a broader working class movement against the government. Last May in Katunayake, when thousands of free trade zone workers protested against a pension bill that effectively cut their wages, police also opened fire, killing one worker and wounding scores more.

Confronted by last month's protests, the government promised a 25-rupee subsidy per 250 litres of kerosene for small boats and 15 rupees per 2,000 litres of diesel for large boats. Late last month, it effectively increased the subsidy, applying it to every 125 litres of kerosene for small boats and 100 litres of diesel for large boats. Although the fishermen have resumed fishing, none of their problems have been solved, and discontent is rising.

Fishermen in the village of Chilaw-Wella, where the police killed Warnakulasuriya, recently spoke to WSWS reporters about their poor conditions, which are an indictment of successive governments.

Chilaw-Wella is located one kilometre west of Chilaw town. It is a thin strip of land between a lagoon and the sea. Families live in huts with coconut leaf roofs or half-built tile-roofed houses. There are no proper facilities for drainage or drinking water. It is a glaring picture of the poverty in Sri Lankan fishing villages.

These fishermen have already been battered by fuel price rises during the past two decades, the high cost of fishing gear and the military restrictions on fishing imposed during the nearly 30-year communal war conducted by the government against the island's Tamil population. After the war ended in May 2009, conditions have only worsened.

Christopher, who had worked with Warnakulasuriya in the latter's small boat, explained the nature of work: "Two fishermen go to sea in a small boat. We leave at about 1 or 2 o'clock in the dead of night, or sometimes even earlier. In addition to our nets, we carry only a good electric torch. After sailing about 15 kilometres, we spread our nets with the help of the torch. We have to keep the torch on, otherwise our boat can collide with others.

"At about 9 in the morning we return to the beach. If we don't get a good harvest we have to stay fishing for longer. Our mothers and sisters help us to collect fish from the nets at the beach. Then we go to the market to sell the catch."

Christopher explained the backbreaking nature of his job: "After lunch we have only one or two hours' sleep. Then we have to repair our nets. Following that, we bring our boat through the lagoon to get fuel at the filling station. It is about 9.30 p.m. when we go to bed after making all the preparations for going to sea the following day. We get less than five hours' sleep a day. While most other people in the country are sleeping, we are at sea."

Christopher added: "My father has been fishing since he was 9 years old. We lived in a thatched house until I was 3, and after that in a wooden hut with corrugated sheets for the roof. We built this house with cement just three years ago, but it is still unfinished."

W. Kumar, a relative of Warnakulasuriya, said: "We are also human beings. We also feel cold, heat, mist, sleepiness. All we wear is a casual dress and a hat. We also get ill. Compared with other jobs, there are no words to describe the hard work we have to do. We face storms and rain at sea. I am married with two children. Our wives and mothers wait nervously until we return from the sea. Last month, one of our fishermen got his feet caught in a net and fell into the waters. His body was found later. Last week, another young fisherman was killed by lightning."

Clinton, 19, commented: "We can't continue our schooling due to economic hardships. I studied only up to Grade 8. We have only Sunday as a holiday, and sometimes we have to spend that day repairing our nets."

Another fisherman said: "The sea remains rough for about six months a year. During that time we catch some fish from the lagoon for our meals. On those days

we don't have proper meals. When we can't afford vegetables, we have to make do with rice and soya meat curry or coconut and chilli-paste. When we can't afford even that, we have to go to sea, risking our lives during the rough season."

A small boat operator at Ambakandawila, Chilaw told WSWS reporters: "Although we have been promised a fuel subsidy, we are not sure how long it will last. Previously, it was paid only for a month. This will be same in a few months."

He explained the tiresome bureaucratic procedure that fishermen have to undergo to claim the fuel subsidy. They must obtain the approval of three administrative officers, then wait in a queue to get the fuel.

Another small boat operator said they still had to pay 10 rupees more per litre of kerosene, even after the subsidy. "Now the fish harvest is not enough to cover the fuel costs. We can't continue fishing like this," he added.

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