

Thousands of Sri Lankan fishermen protest over fuel price rises

Our correspondents
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Tens of thousands of fishermen along Sri Lanka's coastal belt began protests on Sunday against fuel price rises announced by the government late last week.

Fishermen boycotted work, hoisting black flags at ports and on their boats, and demanding subsidies. Early this week, no fresh fish was available at numerous fish markets, including at Chilaw, Beruwala, Galle, Matara and Hambantota.

On May 10, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government increased diesel and petrol prices by 17 percent and 15 percent per litre respectively, to 137 rupees (\$US0.87) and 109 rupees. Kerosene was lifted by 130 percent to 101 rupees per litre. The price of diesel and kerosene, which are used to power trawlers and other fishing boats, drastically impacts on fishermen.

The price increases were demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as a pre-condition for releasing the fourth installment of its bailout loan.

Fearing that the fishermen's protest would spread, Sri Lankan Minister of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Vijith Wijayamuni Soyza "promised" to arrange a subsidy system.

Soyza held discussions with fishermen's union leaders on Wednesday and proposed to credit future subsidies to the bank accounts of small-boat fishermen. While the unions rejected this, they instructed members to return to work after Soyza promised to settle the issue by May 18.

The Lady Carmel Fishermen's Union, an alliance of 27 unions at the village level in Chilaw, and the Federation of Fishermen's Unions, a front of 23 unions in Negombo, were among those involved in discussions with Soyza. Negombo and Chilaw are the two main fishing areas north of Colombo.

The All Ceylon Fishermen's Union, which is

controlled by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), held separate discussion with the fisheries minister.

Massive protests by fishermen erupted in February 2012, when former president Mahinda Rajapakse's government lifted fuel prices. The government deployed special task force officers to suppress the demonstrations. In Chilaw, police shot dead Antony Warnakulasuriya, a young fisherman, and injured several others.

Fishermen spoke with WSWs reporters this week, denouncing the government's fuel price increases and explaining their difficult social conditions.

Antony, from Chilaw, said: "We used to spend 1,200 rupees (\$US8) on kerosene. Now, with the increase, it will go up to 2,800 rupees. If we fail to catch enough fish, how can we sail the next day?"

"This is a crime. Members of parliament and government ministers buy vehicles worth millions of rupees and steal the public wealth. Then they attack us. The increase in the cost of fuel has affected everyone. We must unite to fight these attacks."

Nihal said: "There is no difference between any of these governments. I'm paid 1,000 rupees per day for mending nets but this is not enough to cover my daily expenses."

Jude, another fisherman, said that he did not trust the government's promise to provide subsidies. He said: "The previous government did the same thing, but the time we spent standing in the queue to get the fuel subsidy meant we had no time to go to sea." In every election the politicians have promised to build a fishing harbour for Chilaw fishermen, he continued, but it has never been carried out.

A fisherman from Thoduwawa in Chilaw said that fuel price hikes would greatly affect his income. "The daily cost of fishing will be more than doubled by the

fuel price increase,” he said. “While a small boat needs up to 20 litres of kerosene per day to operate, the fish catch is never certain. As well as fuel increases, the cost of fishing equipment has also gone up. We fish six days a week. Sometimes we only make a profit on two days.”

He denounced the government and other ruling class parties: “This government came to power promising concessions to fishermen and all other poor people. But after more than three years in office our situation has worsened. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has promised several times to build a fishing harbour in our area but nothing has happened. In the last elections, I voted for this government. In the recent local elections, I didn’t vote for anyone.”

A fisherman on a multi-day boat, which remains at sea for several days, explained that these vessels used 10,000 litres of diesel per trip and 2.4 million litres in a two-month period. He said the new fuel prices increased the cost of each trip by at least 90,000 rupees. “We have to earn about 5 million rupees each trip. The boat owner gets half of the fish we catch and the rest is divided among us. Last time I only received 97,000 rupees for two months’ work. As expenses increase, our share will go down.”

A group of small-scale fishermen from Hirewatta Wella in Ambalangoda denounced the government attacks on workers, farmers and students. One said: “If the government fails to give us a concession, we will go into the streets with our boats. We are at sea from 5.00 a.m. to 3.00 p.m. every day but cannot earn enough to pay for our daily expenses because costs are skyrocketing. Everyone must unite to fight for their rights.”



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