

Sri Lankan Navy brutally arrests 30 fishermen in militarily occupied North

Our reporters
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The recent round-up of 30 fishermen by the Sri Lankan Navy at sea, off Poonakary in the northern Kilinochchi district, reveals military's brutal methods in the occupied north and east of Sri Lanka.

The fishermen's so-called "offence" was trying to earn a livelihood by diving to the seabed at night to catch a creature named "sea cucumber," which comes out on the seabed at night-time. However, the fisheries ministry has restricted the sea cucumber catch since March 2019, limiting it only to permit holders and banning night catching on conservation grounds.

On March 29, Navy sailors boarded three vessels around 1.30 a.m., clubbing and kicking the fishermen before arresting them, tying their hands.

The arrested fishermen told the Navy that two of their colleagues were in the water at the time, pleading to take them on board. The sailors ignored their appeal. The two abandoned fishermen survived only by swimming seven nautical miles to the shore.

All the fishermen were from Kiranchchi village in Poonakary. They were brought to Valaippaadu, seven kilometers from Kiranchchi, then packed in a small lorry and brought to fisheries department office in Kilinochchi, 65 kilometers away.

The fishermen were detained at Kilinochchi court premises before they were released on bail at 5.30 p.m. None were treated for their injuries caused by the assault by Navy personnel. They were held without food and water for more than 17 hours.

Their trial on charges of "illegal fishing" has been scheduled for October 10. If convicted, they would be fined 25,000 rupees (\$US125), equivalent to one or two months' income of a fisherman in the area, depending on the fish harvest.

This is the Navy's second round-up of Kiranchchi fishermen in three months. The Navy attacked

fishermen in the same brutal manner on January 7, arresting 23.

These naval operations are part of continuing repression by the Sri Lankan military, even 11 years after successive Colombo governments' 26-year communal war against Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ended in a bloody massacre of the LTTE. Many villagers in the north and east have traditionally engaged in fishing. During the war, the villagers lived as refugees, constantly on the move. Dependent on businessmen to finance purchases of fishing equipment, they are now exploited to the hilt amid the devastation left behind by the war.

The Sri Lankan Navy declared in a news release that naval operations in the last two weeks of March caught 75 persons engaged in illegal harvesting of 10,219 sea cucumbers. It declared: "Sri Lanka Navy has increased its day and night patrols covering the seas around the island in an attempt to prevent adverse effects on the marine environment..."

Under President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's government, the military's activities have been intensified. Publicly presented as attempts at defending "national security" and "curbing terrorism" which is "raising its head," these operations aim to intimidate the Tamil and Muslim population and to provoke communal hatreds to divide and weaken the working class.

Rajapakse is moving to entrench a presidential dictatorship based on the military. He has appointed at least 28 in-service and retired high-ranking military officers to top government positions and deployed military forces to perform civilian duties. He has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the unprecedented social and economic crisis it caused, by intensifying the drive towards authoritarian rule, terrified at growing social anger uniting Sinhala, Tamil

and Muslim workers alike.

During the war, fishing at sea was totally banned much of the time. When it was briefly allowed, fishermen were issued permits. However, they faced arrest, murder, abduction and being disappeared at all times.

After the war, fishing communities' living conditions did not improve. They still work day-to-day, struggling to preserve their families from hunger. Like hundreds of thousands of people in the North and East, these fishermen also lost family members and belongings during the war. They are among those whom successive governments neglected and prevented from rebuilding their lives. Many still live in makeshift huts.

None of the Tamil nationalist parties are concerned about the plight of these fishing communities or, for that matter, of any section of the workers and poor. The Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP) is part of the ruling coalition headed by Rajapakse, backing his dictatorial moves.

The other Tamil nationalist parties, including the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), represent layers of the Tamil bourgeoisie who are busy maneuvering with the Colombo regime, and especially with Washington and the other western capitals to secure their privileges. Tamil businessmen including those who exploit the fishermen are connected to those parties as well.

Dire difficulties drive fishermen to undertake dangerous activities like catching sea cucumbers, even with improvised diving gear. Some divers do not have even oxygen tanks for survival and gather a meager harvest of sea cucumbers to sell them to predatory businessmen who exploit their misery.

Fishermen depend on boat owners who pay them half the price of the catch. Sea cucumbers are priced from 1,000 to 1,500 rupees (US\$5 to \$7.50) according to the size, which varies from 0.4 to 2.5 kilograms. However, once exported, principally to be sold as an up-market nutritious food in East Asian countries, a kilogram of processed sea cucumber is sold at around \$3,000.

Thanusan, a young fisherman, told the WSWS he has no boats or nets and is compelled to catch sea cucumbers. He had to stop catching them since the navy arrests began, however, and he is now indebted 42,000 rupees to the village shop.

He said: "We can catch cucumbers for only six months and for the rest I catch big black sea crabs. The

price of the crabs has fallen to 3,000 from 4,800 rupees due to the corona pandemic. Now I have no livelihood. I catch some fish in a pond near the sea and sell them for a pittance. We prepare curry with soya, dhal and if possible tin fish for meals."

He added, "I have two children. My second son is just two years old. Many families like mine have fallen into economic hardship due to the government's new regulations on fishing."

The government is now trying to develop sea cucumber farms at sea, providing investors with plots measuring at least one acre. Some big investors are involved in this lucrative business. Poor fishing communities are not in a position to invest in these farms, however, and risk being left out or facing intensified exploitation from farm owners.



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