

Sri Lanka: Fishing workers speak out against the destruction of their livelihoods

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Kapparithota is a fishing area with a harbour situated 143 kilometres from Colombo, in the Matara district of Sri Lanka's Southern Province. Like other fishing villages and harbours across the country, the Kapparithota fishing industry is paralysed by the fuel shortages created by the country's unprecedented economic crisis.

Fishing is the major income of many living in coastal towns and villages. But the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands, including fishermen using small boats and workers on larger trawlers, have been wiped out as they have no fuel to go to sea.

In Jaffna alone, in the Northern Province, more than 100,000 fishing jobs have reportedly been destroyed, forcing many families into destitution. Fishermen who used to fish on alternative days find it difficult to fish even once a week. A small boat consumes around 30 litres of kerosene for a day's fishing. Big boats need several thousand litres of diesel to fish at sea for several days.

Small boat owners queueing for days to buy kerosene is a common sight in the fishing areas up and down the country.

Moreover, there is a scarcity of ice needed to preserve fish due to frequent lengthy power cuts, as well as the lack of transportation to take the catch to Colombo and other places for sale, crippling the industry.

A BBC video in May reported: "Crab processing and exporting is a big business in Jaffna. Ice is essential. Processing plants have been closed since April because there is no electricity or diesel to make the ice. In the crab processing industries at Kayts [a small island off Jaffna] most of the workers are women. Their families rely on their income. But now they are not earning any money."

At the same time, working people across the country

have been hard hit by the economic crisis and find it difficult to afford food, including fish. Fish used to be a daily food staple for many, but the price of fish jumped by 100 to 200 percent over the past few months. Last month, official annualised inflation rose to 54.6 percent, but food inflation hit 80.1 percent. More than a quarter of the population have been forced into grinding poverty.

Earlier this month, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse was forced to flee and resign after three months of huge strikes and protests driven by acute shortages and skyrocketing prices of essentials like food, fuel, cooking gas and medicines and hours-long daily power outages. His successor, Ranil Wickremesinghe, has been installed to impose the severe austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and ruthlessly suppress any popular opposition.

The WSWs spoke to fishing workers at Kapparithota, just prior to Rajapakse's resignation.

Devinda, a lorry driver who transports fish, was waiting at the Kapparithota fishing harbour desperate for work.

"I transport fish from Kapparithota to Colombo. Previously the fuel cost for transporting fish was around 10,000 rupees [about \$US27]. But it has now gone up to 25,000-30,000 rupees. The lorry owners have suffered a drastic loss of income. I work for a lorry owner and my job is now in jeopardy. I do not get enough income. There is no fish to transport because of the fuel shortages.

"Many boats do not go fishing these days. Those boats you see anchored there, consume a lot of diesel to get to sea for enough time for a good catch of fish. Look at this place now—it is totally barren. We used to have loads of fish on a day like today. This is a season when we used to get a lot of fish. It was normally a

very busy time for fishing.

“All the jobs in the fishing industry have gone. The lives of fishing workers and their families are at risk. We used to collect the fishing harvest from here and transport it. We were paid around 3,000 rupees for a day’s driving by the lorry owner. Now the lorry owner himself is struggling. He does not even make the cost of the fuel these days. We were able to collect a full lorry load of fish before. Now we get a very small amount.

“Hundreds of lorries used to arrive daily at the main fish market in Paliyagoda, Colombo, to collect and deliver fish to the other parts of the country. Many do not come anymore because of the fuel crisis. Many fish vendors are struggling to collect the money some people owe them.

“The boat workers are totally devastated. They do not have any work. Their families do not have anything to eat. They stay at home with nothing to do. Many are in debt. I don’t know what this government is doing.”

Gamini, a casual worker totally dependent on the fishing industry, was mending a fishing net with others at the Kapparithota fishing harbour.

“I do not have the words to describe the situation we are in. We do not have jobs. We do not have the means to live. We get jobs when the boats go fishing and their nets get torn or tangled. Because there is no fuel, they do not go fishing. So we do not get anything to do. When the fishing harbour was functioning well, we could earn 1,200-2,500 rupees depending on the net owner. We also used to get something to eat. Now, most days, we do not have work. I have four children and my wife to feed.

“Yesterday I bought two loaves of bread and a packet of margarine. It cost me 700 rupees. The price of all essential food items has skyrocketed. When we finish this job today, we don’t know when we will have work again. It is uncertain when the boats will get fuel.

“Some days, we borrow around 500 rupees from boat owners because we want to survive. Some do not even expect to be paid back. They just know that they will need us in the future. If we borrow a large amount, we will have to pay it back. But these days we can’t borrow from them because they don’t have disposable money either.”

The WSWS reporter explained they needed to form independent action committees to fight for their social

needs against the government’s plans to implement austerity.

Gamini commented: “It is a very good idea and I agree that we need to have our own organisations. All we have done so far is to vote for these people who have destroyed the lives of us and our children.”



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