



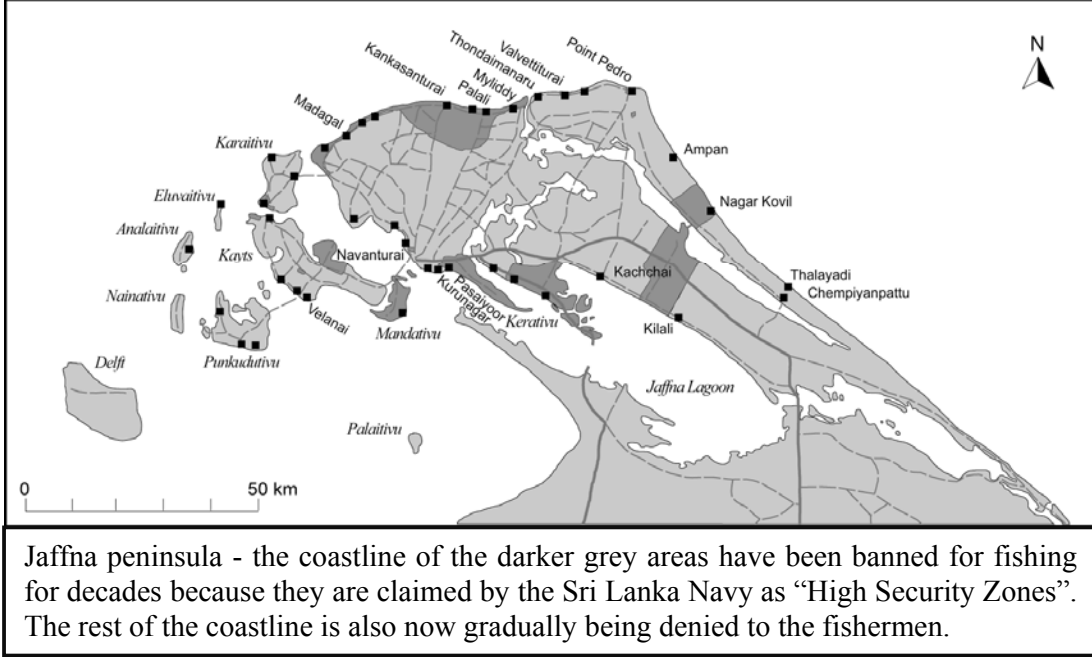
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The wretched fishermen of Jaffna – released 15 August 2008



Jaffna peninsula - the coastline of the darker grey areas have been banned for fishing for decades because they are claimed by the Sri Lanka Navy as “High Security Zones”. The rest of the coastline is also now gradually being denied to the fishermen.

This report on the wretched state of the fishermen and their families in Jaffna is written based on direct interviews with fishermen from Jaffna. Some of them were bold enough to agree for the publication of their photos and names but others were not. Those who agreed to come forward and identify themselves publicly clearly had no close family members left in Jaffna thus their boldness. The fishermen in the photo below are from left to right:



1. Patrick Fernando Alanecs aged 35, married with two children from Kurunagar Jaffna until recently.
2. Mariampillai Aruljenson aged 29 of Pasaiyoor, Jaffna until recently.
3. Ratnam Thanabalasingam from Thirupoor, Mayiliddy Jaffna.

These and the other fishermen we have spoken to are from all around the coastline of Jaffna and they all spoke of poverty and starvation caused by the denial of their livelihood by the Sri Lankan Navy (SLN). According to the fishermen the denial takes many sophisticated forms ranging from, time of day when they can fish, length of time they can fish, where they can

fish, and what they can use for their fishing. The fishermen have been stopped from using engines for their boats, which means all the fishing they do are by manual rowing.

Fishermen face torture and detention for the slightest human error against these restrictions. The fishermen said that even though they are denied their livelihood to the extent of starvation, this is hidden from the outside observers by clever tactics of the SLN. The fishermen explain this below in more detail.

When to fish

Traditionally Tamil fishermen prefer to fish at night. Fishermen said that for whatever reason not known to them their catch rate during the day is only 3% of what they could catch at night. Also, since these fishermen go to sea in open boats, night time fishing is a lot more pleasant without the hot sun blazing over their heads.

Since mid 2006, Jaffna fishermen have not been permitted nighttime fishing. They are allowed into the sea in the mornings and a strict time limit of a few hours is specified by the SLN and the fishermen must return to the shore within that specified time limit. Many fishermen said that this time limit is very restrictive and often they are unable to return in time. One of the reasons that cause delays in returning is when their boat is caught in some current that drags them further away from the shore. Since they are not permitted to use engines, manually rowing their way back to the shore takes a lot of time. The fate that awaits any fishermen who breaks this time limit and other rules were also described by the fishermen and they are given below.

Where to fish

The area where the fishermen can fish is also demarcated by the SLN and presently this area also keeps narrowing down. The distance from shore that they can go to catch fish is limited to 2-3 kilometers, whereas during the 1980's and before these same fishermen are used to go deep into the sea for fishing.

Some areas have been totally barred for fishing and the fishermen who traditionally used to fish in these areas are also made to fish in the very limited areas where they are allowed to fish resulting in overcrowding of boats.

Even within this limit SLN would specify areas that the fishermen should not venture into. It is not difficult to see how hard it would be to abide by these rules without navigational equipment other than the sun. SLN often fires artillery shells into areas around the boundary of the permitted areas to further discourage the fishermen venturing into areas that are barred. Fishermen have been injured by such shelling.

How many may fish

SLN imposes a pass system on the fishermen who wants to go to sea. This has been in place for decades and was in place right throughout the period of the ceasefire. Through this pass system SLN is able to not only control the fishermen taking to the sea but even the people going to the shores from inland. It was said during the ceasefire period that children of fishermen who basically grow up in the shores are now growing up without ever seeing the sea due to this pass system.

Presently fishermen would queue near an SLN checkpoint to obtain a pass to go to sea for that day. Fishermen are taken in small groups of four or five and issued with the pass for the day. The number of fishermen thus allowed to go to sea will vary from day to day. No fishermen can go to sea everyday. If a fishing area has 3000 fishermen who could be permitted into the sea, on average only 300 will be allowed to go on a day. The following day these same fishermen will not be permitted to go. In effect fishermen will get permission to go to sea only two or three times a week.

On a day when an international observer from an INGO or a media is present all the fishermen will be allowed to go to sea. The observer will thus go with the impression that there are no problems for the fishermen.

After an attack by the LTTE, near the area or on the sea, fishing would be banned for several days. In June 2008, following an attack by the LTTE on a small islet called Siruthivu, SLN imposed a total ban on fishing pushing 17,000 fishing families to starvation.

Human error and punishment

Through this maze of restrictions and regulation a fishermen must continue with his livelihood with utmost care not to make too many mistakes. The chances for mistakes are many. As mentioned already, fishermen face problems in keeping to the time restrictions because they are fishing with manually operated boats. Fishermen who return late from sea are accused of meeting with the LTTE at sea.

At sea fishermen can easily lose their pass which is just a plastic token. Losing a pass will attract heavy punishment because the fishermen will be accused of giving the pass to the LTTE.

A tag is kept on fishermen and those who make too many mistakes in keeping to the restrictions are then put through a series of punishments. This would start with the beating with batons. Next stage of punishment would be detention for a few days. The fishermen will be asked to dig bunkers during this time. Eventually the fishermen will be targeted by death squads.

The fishermen NESOHR spoke to described one such incident where a fisherman (let us call him Kannan) was targeted. Some men from the paramilitary group, EPDP, came to the home of Kannan and inquired about the family and him. The EPDP men had what our fishermen described as an "Army family form". Our fishermen described the "Army family form" as follows.

"The "army family form" is a form kept for each family living in Jaffna with all the details of the family. One copy is kept by the military, another copy by the Grama Sevakar and another by the family"

Our fishermen said that the EPDP men could not have obtained the form of Kannan's family from the family or Grama Sevakar and therefore the SLA must have given it to them. Few days after this incident Kannan was shot dead in day light in the market.

Fishermen in general fear such incidents and this makes them truly scared when they are late coming to the shore due to some problems at sea or when lose their pass token.

Relief for the families

Fishermen working under such a maze of restrictions face severe poverty. They cannot work regularly and they cannot fish for enough length of time. Thus the money they bring home is hardly enough even feed the family, let alone for other expenses. Our fishermen said that their children would go to school hungry on many occasions. When asked about relief available to them, the fishermen said that they need money to get the relief which sounded like a tragic joke. The fishermen said that they give the tickets for obtaining the relief to someone with money. This someone would sell the relief and give some of the extra money they got to the fishermen with which the fishermen may buy food for two days out of the seven days.

Remedy sought by fishermen

Although none of the fishermen spoken to have done so, our fishermen said that many fishermen have given up on fishing as a livelihood due to the restrictions and dangers posed by the SLN. Yet, they do not have any other option. Some have taken to fishing from the shores but the income from this is very small. Many go to the KKS harbor in Jaffna to unload cargo from the ships that supply Jaffna after the closure of the A9 route.

Some of our fishermen have also tried their hands at this work of unloading cargo at the KKS harbor. They complained that the payments for this work are not regular and many of our fishermen were owed payments for this work.

The plight of NorthEast fishermen - a recent historical perspective

In the struggle between the SLN and the Sea Tigers to control the seas of the NorthEast, the fishing community of the NorthEast as a group has suffered a great deal. Every Tamil fisherman who fish along the coastline of the NorthEast is suspected of being an LTTE member and therefore they are placed under inhumane restrictions and it has continued throughout the 2002 ceasefire. Our earlier report of April 2006 on the plight of fishermen in Jaffna during the 2002 ceasefire can be read at:

<http://www.nesohr.org/inception-sept2007/human-rights-reports/Fishing.pdf>

The rights of fishermen for their livelihood have been trampled on ruthlessly by the SLN for decades successfully destroying the superior seamanship of the Tamil fishermen. A comprehensive report by NESOHR about the NorthEast fishing community is available at:

<http://www.nesohr.org/inception-sept2007/human-rights-reports/NorthEastFishing.pdf>