

## **DISPLACED FISHERMEN, THEIR MIGRATION AND ITS INFLUENCE ON FISHERIES MANAGEMENT**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Many thousands of Sri Lankan families have been displaced from their home districts by civil disturbance and ethnic conflicts during the last ten years. There are still large numbers of people receiving food assistance, living with friends and relatives, or awaiting repatriation from South India. Fishermen were particularly badly affected by these disturbances and even when not actually displaced the security regulations forbade night fishing and, sometimes, access to the beaches and frequently their equipment, craft and engines were destroyed. In spite of several programmes aimed specifically at assistance to displaced fishermen, there are still many who are unable to return to their original homes and to resume their normal occupation.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Ethnic violence, terrorist activity, security operations and consequent civil unrest have displaced a large number of fishermen since 1983. Some were killed and some injured. Dwellings were destroyed and those affected were forced to seek temporary accommodation in state managed welfare centres or with friends and relatives. Some migrated to other districts. Traditional migrant fishermen were forced to keep away. A large number of fishermen are among those who sought refuge in South India.

Many fishermen who were not physically displaced could not engage in fishing because their craft and gear were destroyed. On the other hand, even if the craft and gear were available, the ground situation did not permit normal fishing. Security requirements restricted fishing in a variety of ways. Therefore, even these fishermen had to depend on food rations given by the state.

Community based fishing including fishery co-operatives at village level and traditional beach seine fishing were seriously affected. Many displaced fishermen are still unable to resume their activities and some of them have permanently left their fishing areas and have settled down elsewhere. Some of the fishermen have given up fishing completely and taken to other trades.

Thus, displacements of fishermen have influenced fisheries management in a variety of ways. In order to get a clear picture of the situation it is necessary to first see the magnitude of the general displacements all over the country since 1983.

### **1. DISPLACEMENTS IN GENERAL**

Displacements commenced in July 1983 with the ethnic conflict in Colombo and the suburbs. Over 100,000 people left their residences and were temporarily accommodated in welfare centres or with friends and relatives. Most of them ran away from their homes in fear. After a short period many of them returned home. The number of displaced persons was reduced to 13,000 within about a month and by the end of the year many of them had been resettled. But fresh disturbances

Table 1.  
No. of families on food assistance

Year	Month	Number of families
1983	July	25,000
1984	December	3,350
1985	December	32,450
1986	December	20,020
1987	December	95,900
1988	August	29,500
1989	August	7,200
1990	July	170,000
1991	August	152,300
1992	December	163,000
1993	March	173,600
1994	June	140,000

started and additional numbers were displaced all over the island (Table 1). The disaster expanded to various militant activities which required security operations by the government. The ultimate result was numerous subversive activities leading to general civil strife. By its indefinite continuation the disaster multiplied the displacements.

Many people were displaced from their homes and had either to go into welfare centres or stay with friends and relatives until the ground situation was sufficiently improved for them to go back to their original places of residence. Some had to leave the country and seek refuge abroad, mainly in South India. Meanwhile, a large number of people were economically affected. They could not engage in their normal economic activities. The worst affected were farmers and fishermen.

Further, those of the originally displaced who were resettled have since been displaced repeatedly due to fresh incidents. Many families were deprived of their breadwinners and other family members due to deaths. A large number was injured and were either partially or totally incapacitated. The whereabouts of a large number are still unknown and they continue to be categorised as missing.

A cross section of the number of families displaced from their residences and who stayed in welfare centres and with friends and relatives since 1983 would show the general trend of displacements. They depended on food rations given by the state. Out of the displaced families, a large number (Table 2) are still in welfare centres and with friends and relatives, unable to get back to their original places of residence. The present 140,000 families on food welfare have not yet been registered for rehabilitation assistance. The total number of affected and displaced

Table 2.  
The number of welfare centres and of families using them or taking refuge with friends and relatives in different districts in 1994.

District	No. of welfare centres	No. in welfare centres	No. with friends or relatives
Ampara	9	1171	883
Trincomalee	24	3489	3901
Batticaloa	8	1020	8710
Vavuniya	8	987	1634
Mannar	7	5429	7554
JaiTha	199	8968	47,482
Kilinochchi	11	5343	6978
Mullaitivu	18	4615	2424
Other Districts*	153	8954	9614
Total	437	39,796	89,185

\* Includes those who migrated from North and East.

families categorised by district (Table 3) gives an overall picture of the situation. In addition there are 20,000 families in South India awaiting repatriation. A large number out of these are fishermen specially from Mannar District.

Table 3.  
The number of families affected and displaced in different districts since 1983.

District	No. of families affected	Total number of families displaced
Ampara	51,000	31,700
Trincomalee	75,000	69,725
Batticaloa	106,075	98,000
Vavuniya	24,000	21,000
Mannar	33,000	22,000
Jaffna	250,000	200,000
Kilinochchi	27,500	22,000
Mullaitivu	25,250	20,000
Other Districts*	14,600	5,500
Total	606,425	489,995

\* Includes those who migrated from North East.

### 3. DISPLACED FISHERMEN

Fishermen have been affected in many ways. Like others, many fisher families have been displaced physically and they fall into the categories of those who went to welfare centres, friends and relatives and those who sought refuge in India. Similarly many fishermen fall into the category of the economically affected. Many restrictions which affected normal fishing were imposed on coastal areas during the last decade. Restrictions were placed on areas of fishing, distance from the coast, period of fishing etc. Many fishermen got caught to direct subversive activities. Some were killed and others injured. Some are in the missing category. Many have lost their craft, engines, and fishing gear. Their houses have been destroyed. An analysis of the fishing population from information available mainly in the affected areas which shows the affected families, the damage caused to their craft, engines, fishing gear and houses would show the extent of displacement caused to fishermen due to the present crisis.

It is interesting to note comments made by District Administrations in their Situation Reports for the last month on fisheries. We may take the comments in respect of Jaffna and Mannar, as examples, as they are two badly affected districts.

#### 3.1 Jaffna

“Around 24,000 families who were solely dependent on fishing in the district, had been badly affected by the total ban on fishing imposed by the Government. During normal times Jaffna district produced 30% of the whole Island’s requirement of fish. A major portion of the catch was sent to Colombo and also for export. The ban on fishing has deprived the entire fishing community of their livelihood. Most of them from the main Island of Kayts and coastal areas of the peninsula Karainagar, Ponnalai, Mathagal, Keerimalai, Kankesanthurai, Kyliddy, Palaly, Thondamannaru, Vettilaikerny and Kaddaikardu have all been displaced and are languishing as refugees in welfare centres and other places. Fishermen who were affected by the ban on fishing and were issued free dry rations under the relief scheme for a short period, were later disallowed to draw this relief. In desperation a few of them ventured out to sea defying the ban and very often lost their lives and fishing gear at the hands of the security forces. Their plight is very pathetic as they had been denied their livelihood and have also been refused any relief”.

#### 3.2 Mannar

“The ban on fishing in the cleared area has been lifted but the fishermen in the uncleared area are not allowed to go fishing and they request dry rations. The approval of the Secretary, Ministry of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Social Welfare has been sought for the issue of dry rations. The request for night fishing by fishermen should be favourably considered in the interest of fishing industry.

The repairs effected to the ice plant at CFC Complex, Pesalai were not satisfactory and this has been brought to the notice of the Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, Ministry of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Social Welfare and Ceylon Fisheries Corporation to rectify the defects. It is regretted to note that not a single Ministry has made any positive move.

This leaves room for misunderstanding to local people in regard to the interest they show in

to the improvement of fishing population.

The poaching by India Trawlers is a very serious problem. This has been brought to the notice of the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources and the Ministry of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Social Welfare. Immediate action is necessary. A suggestion to prevent this is to allow the local fishermen to do trawling during the night has been made to the Ministry Defence.”

If we examine the details in respect of Mannar, we are in a position to get a clearer view of the effects of displacements on fishery management in general. Mannar has over 5000 fishing families and about 7000 active fishermen. Mannar mainland is uncleared and only the Island has been given security clearance. A large number of fishermen went to India in 1986 and again in 1990. Many fishermen are at the Open Relief Centre at Madhu.

The main types of fishing were shallow water fishing, drift nets, beach seine and trawling. Beach seining was operated mainly by migrants.

Restrictions have been imposed in respect of night fishing and area (even on land there are no go areas). As a result, fishing has been at a minimum level for a long time. With the displacement of the beach seining migrant fishermen, it is noticed that the beach seines are gradually going out of use. Instead ‘Disco Nets’ and ‘Laila Nets’ are in operation. The beach seine set up has been seriously affected. Indian trawlers continue fishing on a large scale in the waters close to Mannar. Even the multi-day boats introduced recently have not become established in Mannar.

Under the Emergency Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Programme Progress Reports, the following comments have been made under fisheries;

“4.40 Under the ADB funded Agriculture Rehabilitation Project (ADB II) credit was made available for replacement of fisheries boats and equipment and rehabilitation/reconstruction of infrastructure. Under the infrastructure component, a work plan has been prepared for Rs. 59.7 m for the reconstruction of fisheries infrastructure such as buildings, supply of vehicles, furniture and equipment. Major projects include restoration of Cod Bay fisheries harbour complex, Batticaloa cold room complex, selected ice plants and fisheries training centre complex at Batticaloa (completed). The expenditure so far is Rs. 17.28 million.

4.41. Australia has gifted 2,500 fishing net packs worth a \$362,000 for distribution among lagoon fishermen in Ampara and Batticaloa districts. Distribution has been completed. In addition, it has also financed purchase of 120 outboard motors by NEPC. Distribution has been completed.

4.42. NORAD is supporting a programme on the production of fibreglass canoes and their distribution to conflict affected fishermen under the BIRRP. Some 250 families have benefited Expenditure: Rs. 2.37 million.”

In spite of the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction assistance displacements still continue. Those who cannot get back to their original places of residence or migrate and find places of their choice are likely to be relocated by the state in the near future. The state does not expect to continue with welfare centres for the displaced. This is applicable to the displaced fishermen as well. The effects of displacements among fishermen on future fisheries management will have to be looked at from this point of view as well.