

# SEAFARERS FISH WORKERS, AND SUPPORTERS UNITE IN MAURITIUS

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Solidarity was a constant theme during the 4th Regional Congress at the Apostolate of the Sea held in Mauritius on December 7 – 12<sup>th</sup>. The gathering brought together 38 participants from nine different countries. Southwest Indian Ocean Regional reports were given by delegates from Mauritius and Rodrigues, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa and Madagascar. Other international supporters from the Vatican, Great Britain, and Taiwan also attended. The France-based Catholic Commission Against Hunger and For Development (CCFD) and the Institute for Development and Progress (IDP) in Mauritius participated as well.

ICSF member Robert Fleurot briefed the Congress on the Collective's action against Johnson Motors. He also made available issues of SAMUDRA and reported on other ICSF advocacy and lobbying efforts. Fleurot emphasized ICSF's commitment to provide a platform for fishworkers to make their concerns known at the international level.

The Congress affirmed the important roles played by seafarers' wives, mothers and family members. Not only do they share in the struggles of their men, but they are also vital in protecting the dignity and human rights of fishworkers. A powerful symbol of family suffering was the presence of three wives of Mauritian fishermen who were lost at sea while fishing the banks off Nazareth.

Proposals for future work stressed spiritual nourishment, human development, technical training and strengthening of solidarity through ICSF and other NGOs. The Congress also encouraged ecumenical cooperation to safeguard the rights of all maritime workers.

Jean Vacher, Co-Director of the Apostolate of the Sea, Port Louis, reported on the plight of refugees of the

sea. He explained that such refugees are foreign fishworkers -Filipinos, Thais, Burmese, South Africans, and others- working primarily on Taiwanese industrial fishing vessels. Since 1988 large numbers have sought shelter at Port Louis from the economic exploitation and physical abuse suffered at the hands of Taiwanese captains and crews.

Vacher and his colleague, Raymond Gauvrit, provided powerful documentation of Taiwanese brutality: bamboo poles used to beat fishworkers, enlarged photographs of lacerations, bruises and X-rays of broken bones suffered while on board. There were also pictures of the blackened fingers and toes of a young Burmese fisherman who was forced to work in the refrigeration hole of a Taiwanese ship without sufficient protection against the subzero temperatures. Several of his fingers and toes were subsequently amputated. The Apostolate of the Sea handles over 200 cases of abuse yearly.

A representative from the Presbyterian Fishermen's Service Centre in Taiwan was invited to attend the Congress. Linda Petrucelli provided background on the exploitative nature of Taiwan's fishing industry. She explained the stresses of life on board, linguistic and cultural differences among the multiethnic crews and the lack of training, which create explosive conditions. Representatives from Apostolate of the Sea and Taiwan pledged continued cooperation in the struggle for all fishworkers.

The Apostolate of the Sea, founded in the 1920s, is a support organization of the Catholic Church and functions throughout the world. The movement includes a large number of lay people on land and at sea, dedicated to guaranteeing the human rights and dignity of all people of the sea.