

From Asia/ Sri Lanka

Poisoned dynamite

Women and men of fishing communities work together to demand a ban on dynamite fishing

by Herman Kumara, the Convenor of National Fisheries Solidarity Organization (NAFSO)

Vineetha Kahingala is a 35-year old housewife in a fishing village on the southern coast of Sri Lanka. She has three small children—a son and two daughters—the smallest of whom is less than a year old. Her husband is a traditional small-scale fishworker, working with two others in a boat. They go to the sea early in the morning and come back by around 9.00 am. Their income depends on the catch. The boatowner gets 50 per cent from the net income and the three workers share the rest. Some days, they each earn below Rs. 50, and on the rare better days, they may even get around Rs. 500 each.

Vineetha has been facing many problems over the last ten years due to the ongoing civil war situation. The small boat her husband works in cannot operate in the rough sea during the monsoon season lasting almost six months of the year. Prior to the start of the civil war, Vineetha's husband and the other fishermen in the area used to migrate to the north and east coasts of the country, during this period. But now, due to the civil war, it is not possible to fish anymore in the north and the east. This has affected not only Vineetha's family, but also all other fishing communities in the country.

Vineetha narrated her life struggle with tears. Earlier, the catch during the calm season was adequate to run the family smoothly. But today they face a number of problems caused by the rich and powerful people. Purse-seine fishing using light lures and dynamite fishing are some of the worst problems affecting the fishing communities along the southern coast.

Dynamite fishing has been responsible for the present poverty of Vineetha's family. The operators use dynamite to destroy all the fish stocks. They collect as much fish as they can, while the rest of the dead fish is left in the sea. Ironically, the dynamite operators are day labourers from within the community. But they are also helpless since they depend on others for their survival.

They are backed by six powerful multimillionaires. The small fisher people cannot operate their boats in the area because they face death threats from dynamite operators. At the same time, since fish production from dynamite fishing is very high, it depresses fish prices in the local market. Artisanal fishermen, who catch small amounts, cannot earn enough even for their survival.

Says Vineetha, 'After these dynamite operators came here, our families have been starving. My eldest son cannot go to school, because he doesn't have anything to eat, no shoes, no bus fare, no money to buy books. Some days my husband does not catch any fish. No fish at all. This year we had to get loans, at up to 20 per cent interest per month from the same merchants who support the dynamite fishing.' Vineetha is anaemic. As she herself is starved of nutritious food, she is unable to breast-feed her youngest child.

Vineetha, a very dynamic woman, works with the women's group, Savistri (Women for Development Alternatives) as a community leader. They have a savings group, but are unable to save now, since there is no money to save. Savistri and the Southern Fisheries Organization (SFO) have been working to draw attention to the problems they are facing. NAFSO, a network of 10 fishworker organizations working with coastal and inland fishing communities in Sri Lanka, has been supporting this struggle, and a street drama group has been formed to educate others and to get their support. Media tours have also been organized to ensure that these issues receive better media coverage.

The women got together and wrote a petition to the Fisheries Minister and to the President demanding an immediate ban on dynamite fishing. As a result, the Minister of Fisheries ordered that dynamite fishing be stopped. The police caught a few boats using dynamite and jailed the operators, but both the boats and the operators were released on payment of a small fine. The dynamite operators bribe police and government officials, and small fisher people continue to suffer. Activists at SFO have even received death threats from the powerful dynamite operators.

'This practice should be stopped. All the illegal equipment should be destroyed.' This is the voice of Vineetha's group. 'This should not be the struggle of fisher peoples alone. Fish consumers must also come

forward to stop this. Our husbands are under deaththreat if they raise their voice. That is why we have come forward.' This is the voice of the women's group.

The story of Vineetha is not only the story of one woman. It is the story of around 2,500 small fisher families along the southern coast. The courage of women like Vineetha clearly shows how women contribute to the life and livelihood of fishing communities in the country.