



NATIONAL ALLIANCE OF PEOPLES' MOVEMENTS

C/o Chemical Mazdoor Sabha, Haji Habib Bldg., 1st flr, Naigaon Cross Rd., Dadar East, Mumbai - 400014 Ph: (O) 24150529 (R) 25369724, E-mail: sansahil@vsnl.net

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The news about the West Bengal Government using police force and resorting to beatings, arrest and confiscation of boats to prevent hundreds of fishermen from landing on to Jambudwip, the land of struggle, is more than shocking! This action by the Left Front Government, against the Supreme Court orders dated 25th August 2003 and in violation of fisher people's right to livelihood and hence is condemnable. The National Alliance of Peoples Movements resolve to seek from the state government and the left front an apology and appropriate compensation for the loss and harm borne by the fisher people and demand an immediate dialogue on the issue and thorough investigation to assess the situation in Jambudwip with its legal, social, environmental aspects to come to a written understanding between the government and the NFF.

We support the struggle claiming the traditional rights to the resources since the anthropological evidence establishes their existence in Sunderbans since generations. The Right to life granted by the Constitution too require that their only source of livelihood, fishing and related access to the islands can't be snatched away from them. It is obvious from the forests and mangroves alive in the region till date, as against their destruction and degradation all over, that the fishing communities conserved those. Yet the false allegation and anti-people approach by the Central Empowered Committee of Ministry of Environment and Forest is clearly indicative of the pressures from the vested interests such as the anti-poor corporate sector.

The West Bengal Government should have, in such a situation, protected its own fisher people and their rights against the unjust orders of their eviction and fought the center, if needed. Instead, even after having settled the matter months ago, when there was a dialogue with the Fisheries Minister concluded by the government admitting the fisher peoples' rights, the government has unbelievably and probably deliberately misinterpreted the Supreme Court orders, as is clear from the letter by the Chief Secretary.

The interim order of the apex court, dated 25.8.2003 prevents only the mechanized boats and trawlers but not the rest till disposal of the case. The state government however, got the police to attack all those using simple, traditional boats. This is unbelievable and unjustifiable. This also shows a clear violation of the Supreme Court.

All this needs urgent correction. All fisher people must be allowed to land safely on the Jambudwip and not roaming in the sea. A few thousand families facing crisis need to be provided with immediate compensation. We demand a complete statusquo till the Supreme Court gives its verdict in the long pending case.

If this doesn't happen the news that Sahara India, the politicised giant Indian corporate needs the area, at least 270 Sq. km in the Sunderbans for the floating city with mechanized boats, destruction of forests and ecology and for which the state is keen to have the Jambudwip land too will prove vindicated. The tourism, consumerist city building and other perverted goals and priorities of the governments can't be allowed to take a toll of life of the poor landholders. We therefore request the left Front Government to make its stand clear before all the allies of National Alliance of People's Movements takes to struggle

Medha Patkar
(National Coordinator)

police contingent landed up in the island (themselves arrived in mechanized boats) and started beating and chasing the fish workers from the island. 13 people sustained injuries, 3 were seriously injured, 4 were arrested and 2 were released on Sunday and 2 on Monday on bail. Further one boat was seized which contained food provisions and fishing implements LPG cylinders and ovens.

It is clear that neither the CEC Report has been accepted so far by the Supreme Court nor the application filed by the National Fishworkers' Forum challenging the said report has been decided. It cannot be any stretch of imagination be interpreted to mean that the transient fishing activity, which includes fish drying, itself has been prohibited by the Hon'ble Supreme Court. But astonishingly the Principal Secretary Home and Home Secretary to the Govt. of West Bengal in his circular dated 13.10.2003 wrote, " In view of the aforesaid order of the Supreme Court there is no scope for fishing at all in the Jambudwip area." He directed the District Magistrate of South 24 Parganas to "take appropriate action accordingly" which has been translated into action by the police on Jambudwip on 16.10.2003. Such interpretations by the West Bengal Government have lead to taking away livelihood of the fishermen and thus violate Article 21 of the Constitution. The interpretation by the Principal Secretary, Home and Home Secretary is therefore wholly untenable. If the Government wanted any clarification they should have moved the Supreme Court instead of passing such a draconian order which impinges on the right to livelihoods of 10,000 fishermen, for whom every passing day means loosing out the fishing season this year and pushed further towards ruination.

These fishers could not work on the island last season and have been under going immense sufferings. This time, on the WORLD FOOD DAY they went to Jambudwip to fend for their hungry families with a high hope that Government would honour the Court verdict as they themselves did. But it was not to be. West Bengal police created history by greeting the hungry fishermen with heavy batons and throwing their implements, provisions and foodstuff into the turbulent waters of Bay of Bengal. They do not know where to go and what to do. There are families and kinsmen are squatting at Kakdwip and demanding restoration of their right to life and livelihood.

For more Information Contact:

Thomas Kocherry (World Forum of Fisher Peoples and NFF) 0471-2501376, cell: 9447052376.

Harekishna Debnath (Chairman, National Fishworkers Forum) 011-26680914, 26680883.

Sunita Dubey (Envirionmental Justice Initiative) 011-24319856, 9810858502

Souparna Lahiri (Delhi Forum) 011-26680914, 9818147740