

FROM ASIA/ Sri Lanka

## Whose problem?

*Families of fishermen in foreign jails have a difficult time surviving*

by Herman Kumara, the National Convenor of National Fisheries Solidarity (NAFSO), Sri Lanka.

We would like to tell you about the situation of women of fishing families, when their fishermen husbands find themselves in foreign jails. Deep-sea multi-day boat operators often get arrested when they cross the borders of foreign countries. Occasionally this is done on purpose. But most of the time the actual reason may be different. For example, some boats may drift into foreign seas due to engine breakdown. But since they have violated maritime boundaries the charge is the same—violation of the maritime boundaries. The ultimate result is that the crew has to be in a foreign jail for a period ranging from six months to two years.

Our story is about W.M.Lourdes Mourine Fernando, a 37-year old mother of three school-going children, living at Munnakkara, Negombo. Her husband, K.Anthony Joseph Ironius Fernando, has been in an Indian jail for six months already. He is a share labourer in a multi-day boat that belongs to a *mudalali* (investor), also from Negombo. Anthony and his crew left the shore on 30 January this year. They were arrested at the Indian border on 12 February. They are still in an Indian jail, waiting to be released.

Back home, the situation of his family continues to worsen. Mourine has to feed her children and send them to school. Even with an average income this is hard enough, given the present economic situation and rate of inflation. Mourine's mother and mother-in-law helped her to run the family for around one month. Since all families are facing a similar problem, this was not easy. The boat owner gave them Rs.1000 (US\$14) for two months. But for the past four months now there is nothing.

Says the *mudalali*: "We are also helpless. When the boat and crew are under custody we don't have any income. How do we pay back the loans and the interest, while feeding the five families of our boat crews?"

Determined to feed and educate the family, Mourine finally decided to find a job. She took up a job ironing the washed clothes from a laundry. They paid her Rs.100 per day with meals, a meagre income on which it is difficult to survive. In the meantime, there has been no good news about her husband. Nobody to help them.

"They are not organized. They do not want to get organized. Fisher people do not think about their future, and they do not care when we try to form a union. So there is no one to fight when they are in a difficult situation". This is what one of our trade unionists had to say about this situation. "But we will do our best to get the fisher people released."

"These fisher people have gone to rob fish resources in foreign waters. So we do not want to intervene in this problem. Please do not come to me with this problem." This is what our fisheries minister had to say when the family members of the crew and the boat owners went to meet him. When they tried to meet the minister a second time, the main entrance to the fisheries ministry was closed to them.

So what do we do? There is no assistance to the families or any attempt to secure the release of the arrested fishermen. 135 fisher people of more than 25 boats are facing this situation.

Mourine, together with 300 other people, has started an agitation against the policy makers. "You people promoted the deep-sea fisheries industry. You provided high technology and continue to provide such technology that is not appropriate to our fishing grounds. So our people run behind the fish stocks and end up crossing the borders and getting caught. The promoters of the deep-sea fishery should settle this problem." NAFSO is demanding that the fisheries minister help secure the release of innocent fishermen in foreign jails.

The World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF) was requested to intervene. "There is free flow of capital under globalization. But there is no such space for human labour. People need passports and visas. While investors have access to passports and visas to over-exploit our resources, poor fisher people who come for mere survival do not have such facilities. How should fisher people know the

boundaries in the sea? Is there any demarcation?" asks Thomas Kocherry, the co-ordinator of the WFF, who joined the peoples' struggle in Sri Lanka.

Although the number of women facing a situation similar to that of Mourine is increasing, this is not their problem alone. This is a problem of all resource users in our oceans. There should be a collective effort to settle the problem and policy makers should take the initiative. But this will be a long and time-consuming procedure.

But Mourine and others like her need immediate action and prompt settlement if they are to survive. Mourine has been at the forefront among other women, organising prayer services, and joining agitations in front of the ministry seeking the release of fisher people in foreign jails. Their demands are very clear:

- Release all fishermen in foreign jails.
- Prepare an agreement for use of resources reasonably in the Indian Ocean.