



NFSF Position on Transboundary Fisheries Conflict in Palk Bay & Gulf of Mannar

Stop Bottom Trawling

Declare Palk Bay and Gulf of Mannar as Small-Scale Fisheries Reserve





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The National Federation of Small-Scale Fishworkers (NFSF), the largest federation of small-scale fishworkers' unions in India, observes with utmost concern that –

- The conflict between the Indian and Sri Lankan fishers in Palk Bay and Gulf of Mannar waters is continuing for decades and has escalated intermittently with ominous impacts on livelihood, mutual relation and cultural bond between the fishing communities of India and Sri Lanka. It has also become an issue of regular concern and tension in the relation between the two countries.
- The Bay and the Gulf, with their shallow waters, coral reefs and marine and coastal vegetations are ecological paradises that sustained the small-scale fishing communities for ages.
- Traditionally the Indian and Sri Lankan small scale fishers fished in the waters of Palk Bay and the Gulf of Mannar. The Indian small scale fishing fleet was much larger than that of Sri Lanka. The resources were plenty, sharing was friendly.
- Mechanisation of fishing boat started in India earlier than in Sri Lanka and was also speedier than that in the latter. As a result, the capacity of Indian mechanized boats in the Palk Bay increased manifold than that of their Sri Lankan counterpart.
- Initially Indian trawlers were in conflict with the Indian small scale fishers. But the conflict was to some extent subdued as the depletion of catch for small scale fishers drove some of them to seek employment in trawlers, and also because of the introduction of 3/4 day quota fishing system (3 days fishing by trawlers and 4 days by small-scale) together with the promulgation of 3 nautical mile (5.5 kms.) exclusive fishing zone for the small scale fish workers.
- The governments of India and Tamil Nadu took no step to control the numbers or fishing efforts of the Indian mechanized fleet. Government subsidies and other assistance programmes enhanced their capacity and scope for fishing.
- Indian trawlers also came into conflict with Sri Lankan fishers as they took much larger share of fish resources in the Palk Bay and Gulf of Mannar.
- The Sri Lankan civil war stopped fishing in Palk Bay by Sri Lankan fishers. This suspended the conflict between Indian trawlers and Sri Lankan fishers and fuelled phenomenal increase in both catch and capacity of the Indian mechanized fishing fleet. This period witnessed introduction of pair trawling.
- During the civil war the Indian fishing fleet, besides fishing, constituted a supply chain to the Tamil inhabited areas of north Sri Lanka.
- End of the civil war signaled a revival of Sri Lankan fishing in Palk Bay and Gulf of Mannar that was preoccupied by the Indian fleet. It also restarted patrolling by Sri Lankan navy in the area.
- Thus began a new phase of conflict that is still continuing. Indian trawlers intrude into the Sri Lankan waters and get into conflicts with the Sri Lankan fishers and are often apprehended by the Sri Lankan navy.
- But even during this period the Indian trawlers also served as an important supply route of food and other necessities during the corona pandemic and Sri Lankan economic crisis.



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- Sometimes there are firings by the Sri Lankan navy and some of the Indian fishers are injured or killed. Many of them are also incarcerated. A report placed in the Indian parliament states that 71 Indian fishing boats were nationalized and 530 Indian fishers were arrested by Sri Lankan authorities in 2024.
- The Indian navy / coast guard have been failing to block the passage of Indian trawlers into Sri Lankan waters. Their recurrent failure is an indicator of possible malpractices.
- The Indo-Sri Lankan conflict over Palk Bay has gained global geo-political importance with other players trying to gain from the conflict.
- The Government of Sri Lanka has banned bottom trawling in their waters in 2017 to protect the fish resources of the island state. They allege that the Indian trawlers not only trespass into their waters, but also indulge in bottom trawling and destroy their marine resources.
- On Indian side, the fishers claim that they had been fishing in Palk Bay traditionally and so they have a right on those waters.
- This conflict as well as the proliferation and invasion of trawlers in Palk Bay make the water very difficult for small-scale fishers of both countries for fishing. Escalation of conflict results in frequent interruptions in fishing operations. Depletion of fish resources due to over and destructive fishing by Indian trawlers is also a reality.

In view of the above, NFSF resolves that the Governments of India and Sri Lanka must come together to ensure –

- That to protect the rich ecosystem and fish resources of Palk Bay and Gulf of Mannar, which benefit both Sri Lanka and India and provide livelihood to thousands of fishers of the two countries, India should **respect the ban on bottom trawling declared by Sri Lanka and come up with a matching ban on bottom trawling in general and for the Indian side of Palk Bay and Gulf of Mannar in particular.**
- **That Palk Bay and Gulf of Mannar be declared as small-scale fisheries reserves to be administered by the SSF communities on both sides of the Bay or the Gulf** facilitated by the governments of both countries. The SSF communities of both sides will jointly decide on the norms of fishing in the Bay and the Gulf and monitor the same.
- That the administrative regulatory authorities and maritime defense forces of both the countries **help the fishers of their respective countries to avoid entering into one another's territory**, if not agreed mutually.
- That **the provisions under section 3 of article 73 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) are respected** and that **in no case the fishers of one country are subjected to firing, imprisonment or corporal punishment.** They should see to it that the fishers of one country trespassing into another are **returned to their country of origin as early as possible.**
- That the impounded fishing equipments and boats with personal belongings should be **returned to their countries of origin in undamaged state at the earliest.**
- That **proper and adequate rehabilitation schemes for the vessel crew fish workers** of banned trawlers or mechanised boats operating in the Palk Bay and Gulf of Mannar are put in place.