Sea safety for small-scale fishermen: Moving from rhetoric to action

From February 1 to 7, some 70 experts from many countries will meet in Mahabalipuram for IFISH-3, the Third International Fishing Industry Safety and Health Conference. It is being organised jointly by the BOBP-IGO, the FAO of the United Nations and the Alaska Field Station of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, USA.

This is the first time IFISH is being held outside the U.S. Appropriately enough, the conference will place a special emphasis on the safety and health of small-scale fishermen.

This issue therefore focuses on sea safety issues. Pages 6 to 11 summarise the report of Mr Agnar Erlingsson, consultant who visited four countries of the region and did a comprehensive survey of sea safety for small-scale fishermen.

It is therefore pertinent to recall the efforts of the BOBP and the IGO in this area. Four years ago, the Chennai Declaration on sea safety for artisanal and small-scale fishermen was adopted at a regional workshop in Chennai (See box). Leading representatives from the seven member-countries of BOBP at that time (Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Maldives, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Thailand) attended.

Let us re-visit the Chennai Declaration, study its recommendations and the action taken since by governments, fishermen, NGOs and others.

Integration of safety issues into member-countries' fisheries policy and holistic fisheries management frameworks: As Mr Agnar Erlingsson puts it, "While some efforts are being made at provincial and national levels to improve the safety of small-scale fishermen, they are not commensurate with the magnitude of the problem."

Life jackets have been distributed to fishermen, subsidies have been given for the Global Positioning System (GPS). In India, a comprehensive marine policy says that sea safety issues ought to be addressed, but it contains no specifics.

In small-scale fisheries, the concept of co-management is coming into focus. The success of community-based fisheries management (CBFM) has been demonstrated successfully in the past. (The BOBP-supported extension services project in Ranong Province, Thailand, is an example. However, this project had no sea safety component.) Wherever CBFM is strong, it would provide an entry point for sea safety.

Legislation, regulation and enforcement at the national level: The remarks of consultant Agnar Erlingsson (pages 6-10) are pertinent.

To take his comments on Tamil Nadu, there are no regulations for design and construction of fishing boats. Fibre-reinforced plastic (FRP) boats are of poor quality. Enforcement of rules for safety equipment is lacking. He recommends a process of certification of boatyards manufacturing FRP boats, training of boat surveyors, encouraging registration by linking it to subsidies, updating of safety regulations and marine accident statistics.

Most small-scale fishing boats in this region are not insured. There's unfortunately no mechanism to make insurance compulsory. Whenever a calamity occurs, the entire cost of boat restoration and rehabilitation has to be borne by the government. A car cannot take the road without insurance; a similar rule should apply to fishing vessels in the sea.

Incorporation of FAO/IMO/ILO voluntary guidelines for the design, construction and equipment of small fishing vessels: There's not much evidence of this happening.

Fisheries and maritime administrations should enhance their knowledge of the operations and constraints of artisanal and small-scale fisheries sectors …. Unlike commercial fishing and registered vessels, small-scale fishing boats are so numerous and so varied in size, capacity, engine power and operational range, that it's an enormously challenging task for any government to set norms or certify safety. The government should organise studies and programs that systematically set out the status of fishing boats.

Strategies to involve the participation of fisher communities: Sea safety campaigns may flop unless the fishing community is fully involved in the exercise. It's a question of attitude. The fisher should be aware of the dangers he faces and co-operate with efforts to reduce the danger. Fisheries departments need to work with fisheries co-operative societies and fisheries associations to spread the message of safety.

Financial and other incentives to encourage the wide use of safety equipment: These should be linked to registration of boats and compliance with safety and training regulations, as consultant Erlingsson points out.

The following extracts from an FAO report on sea safety are enlightening:

"Some of the factors which have made fishing the most dangerous

Excerpts from Chennai Declaration

1. Sea safety issues should be comprehensively integrated into member countries' fishery policy and management frameworks.
2. Legislation, regulation and enforcement at the national level.
3. Measures for a harmonized and holistic fisheries management framework for the Bay of Bengal.
4. Incorporation of the FAO/IMO/ILO voluntary guidelines for the design, construction and equipment of small fishing vessels and the FAO/IMO/ILO document for guidance on the training and certification of fishing vessel personnel into regulatory frameworks, as appropriate.
5. Fisheries and maritime administrations should enhance their knowledge of the operations and constraints of the artisanal and small-scale fisheries sectors in order to formulate effective guidelines, standards and regulations for the safety of fishing vessels, including certification and training of crews.
6. Development and implementation of education, training and awareness programmes which satisfy regulatory requirements, while also building a culture of sea safety within artisanal and small-scale fishing communities.
7. Strategies that involve the participation of fisher communities, families, the media and other stakeholders to promote adoption of a wide range of safety measures.
8. Measures to enhance the economic viability of artisanal and small-scale fishing enterprises as an essential element of sea safety.
9. Financial and other incentives to encourage the wide use of safety equipment, and training in the use of such equipment.
10. R & D for cost-effective safety-related equipment relevant to the needs of artisanal and small-scale fisheries.
11. Formulate a regional sea safety programme.
12. Address the issue of sea safety on an urgent basis.

occupation in the world are: excessive fishing effort; increased competition; reduced profitability; economies in vessel maintenance, equipment and manpower; fatigue; recklessness; fisheries management measures (which do not take sufficient account of the human element or fishers' safety into consideration); diversified fishing operations unaccompanied by training, traditional experience and skills.

In developing countries, the consequences of loss of life can be devastating: widows have a low social standing, there is no welfare state to support the family and with lack of alternative sources of income, the widow and children may face destitution.

Effective approaches to safety at sea everywhere in the world and at all levels, rely on three lines of defense:

- prevention (the most reliable and cost-effective component): suitable equipment, training, experience, information and judgement to avoid getting into trouble in the first place;
- survival and self-rescue: the equipment, training and attitudes necessary to survive and effect self-rescue when things start to go wrong;
- Search and Rescue (the most costly and least reliable of the three levels): systems of alert, search and rescue, which are called upon when the first two lines of defense have failed.

There are a number of areas where improvements can be made at the national level with FAO assistance:

- provision and analysis of data identifying the cause of accidents;
- education and training of trainers, extensionists, fishermen and inspectors;
- improved fisheries management, safety regulation and enforcement;
- increased collaboration between fishermen, fishers' organizations and government."

From Alaska to Mahabalipuram

Dr George A Conway, Chief of the Alaska Field Station of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) is one of the drivers of IFISH-3. He was also a key figure of IFISH 1 (held in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, USA in 2000), and IFISH 2 (held in Alaska in 2003). Excerpts from his conversation with ***Bay of Bengal News.***

How his work with sea safety started: "We have been working on sea safety issues from 1991, because Alaska had the highest number of fatalities in the fishing industry in the U.S. (some 35 deaths a year). We were asked to set up surveillance, prevention, and safety activities.

We provided technical assistance to the Coast Guard, and collaborated with the Alaska Marine Safety Education Association and the North Pacific Vessel Owners' Association. There were regulations implemented for cold water fisheries in the U.S. under the Commercial Fishing Vessel Sea Safety Act of 1988. That law required such devices as life rafts, personal floatation devices, EPIRBS (Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons) which are satellite-based communication devices.

The combined effect of all this: the mortality in Alaska fell dramatically, by more than 70%. It now stands at 10 to 12 deaths per year.

How did IFISH come about? We held three domestic conferences in the U.S. in 1992, 1995 and 1997. The last one, held in Seattle, suggested that we expand the scope of the conference. Result: IFISH 1 in 2000. There were some 135 participants including FAO and ILO, from 17 countries. IFISH-2 had some 125 participants from 20 countries. The FAO sponsored participation by eight developing countries.

The view was expressed that the next IFISH conference should be held in a developing country, and should emphasise sea safety in small-scale and artisanal fisheries. Dr Y S Yadava volunteered to host IFISH-3 on behalf of BOBP-IGO, and that's how the conference has moved here. Further, this was a logical sequel to the Chennai Declaration adopted in October 2001.

Any conclusions from IFISH-3 are not mandatory, but we believe that the process of information, discussion and exchange of views among a variety of fisheries experts from different parts of the world about safety issues, takes both knowledge and constructive action forward. We are very optimistic about the potential of IFISH-3.

The Chennai Declaration recommended the formulation and implementation of a regional sea safety programme, employing a consultative and participatory approach, building upon institutionally derived data, together with the operational experience of artisanal and small-scale fisher communities. It also recommended that the issue of sea safety be addressed on an urgent basis. However, little has been achieved so far and it is therefore time to address the multi-dimensional issues of sea safety on priority basis so that the rhetoric is turned into reality.

– Y S Yadava