Safety at Sea- Where do artisanal and small-scale fishermen stand?

Every day thousands of artisanal and small- scale fishermen in the Bay of Bengal embark on fishing trips to earn their livelihood. Some of them drift — for what seems to them to be an eternity — and end up in alien land. A few Robinson Crusoes survive the ordeal and return. The trauma of uncertainty their families face when they are missing, can well be imagined.

What about fishermen who perish in the seas, leaving wives and children shell-shocked and almost destitute overnight? The families' misery unfolds immediately: no savings, no alternative means of livelihood, few income opportunities. The families either migrate to urban areas to take up menial jobs, and are cruelly exploited; or they beg for a living. Some, crushed by debt to money lenders, become bonded labourers.

What's behind this human tragedy is well- known — a poor standard of sea safety in artisanal and small-scale fishing crafts. The government, the boat owners, the fishermen — all three are equally to be blamed for this state of affairs. Simple safety and communication equipment on board could save many of the lives lost at sea.

Unlike many other seas, the Bay of Bengal is rough for most parts of the year. Cyclones are frequent and come with little warning. Monsoon winds increase the perils of fishing at sea. Artisanal and small-scale fishing vessels are unequipped to meet these challenges. Those in the region are best suited for fishing in near-shore waters. With resources in coastal waters dwindling, fishermen are venturing deeper into the sea, oblivious to the risk.

Accidents at sea occur mostly because of engine failure, navigational difficulties, rudder damage, fuel shortage, lack of safety equipment, etc. These are not insurmountable issues. But a lot of effort and perhaps a long-term programme will be needed to inculcate the habit of sea safety among fishermen and reduce loss of life and misery. A BOBP/ FAO/ CIDA Regional Workshop in October 2001 will address these issues and prepare guidelines on sea safety for implementation in the region.

Past attempts at introducing sea safety programmes for small-scale fishermen in the region have met with encouraging success. An example is FAO assistance to the Government of India (TCP/IND/6712) after the devastating November 1996 cyclone in Andhra Pradesh - a success story of how small interventions can create big ripples. The project's major components were a VHF shore-to-vessel communication system in Kakinada, supply of life floats to mechanized vessels, and a comprehensive programme of community-based disaster preparedness in fishing villages.

The Government of Andhra Pradesh has initiated follow-up action and installed more communication towers along its coastline and distributed VHF sets to fishermen. Thanks to these measures, there has been no loss of life at sea in Kakinada in recent years. The Kakinada fishermen are confident that "November 1996 will not happen in their area".

While commercial vessels and industrial fishing boats have a large work force and strong maritime unions to bargain for better safety and welfare measures, artisanal and small-scale fishermen are unorganised and at the mercy of middle-men and uncaring boat owners. For those fishermen who own fishing vessels, the turnover and profits are too meagre for the installation of safety and navigation equipment.

The regulation mechanism is another issue. Regulations to govern boat construction, onboard safety and navigation equipment and weather warnings are either non-existent or poorly enforced in the region. Therefore bad weather and turbulence at sea lead inevitably to boat capsize or to boats drifting at sea, rescue in neighbouring countries and the ordeal of long periods in jails or detention centres. Prevailing legislation governing maritime infringements in many countries of the Bay of Bengal region is poor; procedures for release of fishermen are protracted and cumbersome.

To mitigate the sufferings of genuine fishermen who have strayed into alien waters, a regional mechanism of reporting and release could be considered. BOBP-IGO could be a focal point for working out such a mechanism.

To ensure integration of sea safety into the everyday lives of fishermen, it is essential that they be built around the entire community and not the fishermen *per se*. The school curriculum in coastal areas should include chapters on sea safety. This will go a long way toward inculcating safety disciplines in fisher boys. Extension programmes for fisherwomen, so that they persuade the men-folk to use safety measures at sea, would be another useful step.

In sum, safety at sea should be an integral part of fisheries management. Implementation of sea safety programmes should include mandatory regulations, a sound mechanism for implementation, training and education, prevention and survival strategies, extension. Finally to make such programmes sustainable, the burden of implementation should be shared with governments by the fishermen.

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