

PERIL ON THE HIGH SEAS

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The 15 Indian fishermen who were repatriated from Sri Lanka, in Chennai in July. | Photo Credit: ANI

A series of brutal mid-sea attacks by assailants, suspected to be from Sri Lanka, has left fishers in Tamil Nadu seething with anger. The community has been searching for an end to the violence on the high seas, which has remained a threat to their lives and livelihood for about four decades now.

In recent months, Indian fishers venturing into the sea on small fibreglass boats have come under intermittent attacks. Strangely, the attackers have been unidentified persons in civilian clothes. Indian fishers say the assailants usually come on high-speed boats, hem in their fibreglass boats, and assault the fishers with wooden logs, iron rods and other weapons before snatching away their catch, expensive fishing gear, and navigational equipment.

In the latest attacks on August 21 and 22, [groups of fishers from Nagapattinam district were assaulted and robbed](#) while they were fishing about 15-22 nautical miles off the Vedaranyam coast. At least 15 of them needed hospitalisation. The assailants came in batches of six to 10 in two or more boats. In another incident, the fishing nets of four Indian fishers were wantonly damaged. A fisherman, who escaped with minor injuries, said the attacks mostly happen during nights after the fishers cast their nets so that they cannot flee quickly.

The Vedaranyam Marine Police have since registered five cases on charges of attempted robbery, dacoity, and attempt to cause death or grievous hurt against 46 unidentified Tamil and Sinhalese-speaking Sri Lankan nationals.

Chief Minister M.K. Stalin wrote a letter to the Minister of External Affairs, S. Jaishankar, drawing his attention to the assault on Indian fishermen, allegedly by "Sri Lankan nationals." Besides asking Mr. Jaishankar to intervene at the earliest and request the Sri Lankan authorities to take decisive action against the assailants, Mr. Stalin also reiterated the need for pursuing diplomatic channels to find a lasting solution to the issue.

The AIADMK, while condemning the attacks, also accused the State government of failing to do enough to protect the interests of the fishing community. The party general secretary, Edappadi K. Palaniswami, called for strengthening the Coastal Security Group of the Police to safeguard the fishers. After a similar attack in February, the State BJP President K. Annamalai too had written to Mr. Jaishankar seeking action.

The decades-old fisheries conflict between India and Sri Lanka has claimed the lives of several fishers from Tamil Nadu. Representatives of fishermen in Tamil Nadu accuse the Sri Lankan Navy of injuring hundreds of fishermen over the years. Talks between the two countries at the government level and fisher level have not resulted in a durable solution. Indian mechanised trawlers continue to face the wrath of the Sri Lankan Navy, as evident from the sporadic arrests of fishermen, for allegedly straying beyond the International Maritime Boundary Line. In July and August, for instance, 15 fishers from Rameswaram and 10 from Akkarapettai were arrested and their boats seized. Though the arrested fishermen are released after court proceedings in Sri Lanka, reclaiming the fishing vessels is a tedious process. Most seized fishing vessels are destroyed by the ravages of time.

Many fishers and politicians believe that retrieving [Katchatheevu, an uninhabited and barren 285-acre islet](#) which was ceded to Sri Lanka in 1974, could offer a lasting solution. It is contended that the ceding of the islet, located about 14 nautical miles off Rameswaram, has effectively shrunk the fishing area for Indian fishers.

Mr. Stalin has sought to revive the debate on Katchatheevu by demanding the retrieval of the islet. He had urged the Centre to raise the issue with Sri Lankan president Ranil Wickremesinghe during the latter's visit to New Delhi in July. More recently, while addressing a fishermen conference in Mandapam in Ramanthapuram, he said that retrieving the islet would put a permanent end to the problems of fishermen. He was also at pains to dispel the notion that the DMK was a party to the ceding of the islet. He said that the DMK, in fact, organised agitations against the agreement between India and Sri Lanka and recalled how former Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi tabled a special resolution in the Legislative Assembly against the islet being given to Sri Lanka.

As the general election draws closer, the debate is likely to turn intense as the fishing community accounts for a solid vote bank.

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