

# Karachi Fishermen's protest rally suppressed

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By Our Staff Reporter

KARACHI, June 19: Police fired blank shots and teargas shells to disperse fishermen who had converged on Toll Plaza, Super Highway and National Highway to enter the city with intention to take part in a rally organised by the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF) on Monday.

At least 22 PFF members were arrested and the PFF claimed that another 17, including two women, were unaccounted for.

The forum had planned to hold a protest demonstration at the Mazar-i-Quaid and march towards the Sindh Assembly to draw the government's attention to the plight of fishermen communities of Sindh. Its demands included end to the contract system for fishing in the inland water bodies and ban on deep-sea trawlers.

Fishermen from the remote areas of Sindh had travelled to Karachi to take part in the rally.

Meanwhile, PFF President Mohammad Ali Shah has condemned the police action and told Dawn that 17 participants, including two women who had come from Badin, were still unaccounted for since the police launched the crackdown.

Terming the police action 'injustice with the fisherman community', he argued that it was not a political rally. "We are part of the civil society, and fighting for our due rights. Staking out a peaceful rally and staging a demonstration is our constitutional right," he argued.

Referring to the police action at Gaghar Phatak, Mr Shah said the police first allowed the protesters to go ahead after stopping them briefly at the place. However, shortly afterwards, the policemen who had taken up positions around started firing teargas shells at the buses carrying men and women.

At Toll Plaza on Super Highway also, police chased and beat up the fishermen with batons as if they were animals, he deplored, claiming that at least 200 people were injured in the police action.

Despite the police action, a number of protesters had managed to reach Mazar-i-Quaid where they were encircled by police and told not to move ahead, he added.

According to the PFF chief, his organisation had written to the TPOs Jamshed and Saddar, DIG Operations, CCPO Karachi and the provincial home department several weeks back for protection to the planned rally, but there was no response from any of them.

"At least they could have intimidated us if they were not going to allow holding of the rally," he contended.

Meanwhile, senior police officials could not be reached to comment when contacted.

According to PPI, Mr Shah told a rally at the Mazar-i-Quaid that holding peaceful protest was their basic right as enshrined in the constitution.

He claimed that more than 7,000 people from across Sindh had come to Karachi to participate in the rally but had been stopped by law-enforcement agencies at Toll Plaza using force in violation of the democratic norms and standards.

He claimed that the agencies applied baton-charge and fired teargas shells to block the rally injuring more than a dozen of participants.

However, he said, fishermen would not stop their protest until their demands were met. He threatened to organise a march up to Islamabad and rallies in all major cities of the country if the government failed to take concrete measure towards resolving the problems being faced by fishermen. He said that the issues would be raised at international forums.

Terming the contract system for fishing in inland water bodies 'economic murder of fishermen', he

pointed out that fishermen across Sindh were facing starvation due to the system but the rulers were least concerned about their miseries.

PFF leaders demanded abolition of contract system and implementation of licence system in its place. They urged the Sindh government to fulfil its commitment by introducing the fishermen cooperative societies system.

"Even if licence system is introduced, there is fear that the influential people who have been exploiting the fishing resources would not allow fishermen to fish independently. Therefore, the government should make appropriate arrangements to protect fisherman communities' interests," speakers on the occasion said, urging the government to bring illegal occupation of fishing waters to an end and take stern action against occupiers.

They pointed out that the fisherman communities of Sindh had been fishing freely in these waters to earn their livelihood since 1947 but, with the objective of regulating fishing and registering local fishermen, the Sindh government had introduced licence system in 1977 and provided it legal cover through the Sindh Fisheries Act-1980.

A few years back, they said, the Sindh government introduced contract/auction system that resulted in transfer of fishing rights to influential contractors, rendering the local fishermen almost without a livelihood.

They deplored that the government during the current year started the process of abolishing the licence system across the province.

Leaders and workers of the Muttahida Labour Federation, Pearl Continental Hotel Workers' Union, Sindh Hari Mazdoor Mahigeer Alliance, Mazdoor Mahaz Amal and others worker unions and organisations attended the rally in a large number.

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