

Pakistan, India urged to resolve fishermen's detention issue - "frequency of fishermen's arrests at sea had increased"

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KARACHI: The Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF) on Thursday sent letters to the Indian and Pakistani authorities, demanding an amicable resolution of fishermen's detention issue on both sides.

Representatives of the non-governmental organisation working for fishermen's welfare said that the frequency of fishermen's arrests at sea had increased since the escalation of tension on Pakistan-India borders.

"They are not criminals but they are put behind bars for allegedly violating the unmarked sea-territory on both sides. We demand immediate release of all fishermen detained on both sides of the border," said Mustafa Gurgaze representing the PFF.

He appreciated the release of 17 Pakistani fishermen by the Indian authorities on Thursday. But, he added, the initiative was meaningless until the authorities on both sides resolve the issue for good.

The organisation, he said, had sent letters to the prime ministers and the foreign affairs ministers as well as relevant officials of both countries to highlight the issue.

He specifically referred to the cases of Hussain Walri and Hanif, both Pakistani fishermen who had been imprisoned in Jam Nagar, India, since 1993. The fishermen, he said, had completed their sentence but their release was being delayed due to non-payment of fine of 100,000 Indian rupees each.

"We urge the Indian government to release them on humanitarian grounds as they have been in jail for the past 21 years. They have suffered a lot physically and mentally and now deserve to be shown mercy," he said, adding that an individual from Lahore had offered financial support for their release.

PFF chairperson Mohammed Ali Shah said that over 500 Indian fishermen had been arrested and their 850 boats seized by the Maritime Security Agency (MSA) of Pakistan while 261 Pakistani fishermen were languishing in different Indian jails and around 215 Pakistani boats had been confiscated by the Border Security Force (BSF) of India.

"The process of verification of citizens is extremely complicated and takes a long time. The PFF has demanded repeatedly that the nationality of detained people should be verified within a month," he said.

Citing the letter, Mr Shah has written to Pakistan and Indian officials on behalf of victim fishermen families, he said that the fear of getting arrested had led to increased reluctance among fishermen to go fishing in the deep sea. This situation, in his opinion, was badly affecting the economy of the fishing communities.

"The hardships have only increased due to the confiscation of boats which is a source of livelihood for the fishing community. A large number of fishing boats are lying on Saurashtra and Karachi coasts, located in India and Pakistan. Most of these boats are either damaged or their parts stolen. There are reports that MSA has auctioned some of the Indian boats, which is illegal and violation of international laws and treaties," he said.

The PFF, he said, had urged the governments of both India and Pakistan to look into this important matter and accept fishermen's demands that should include a commitment not to make arrests of each other's fishermen as a confidence-building measure.

"Till this policy is evolved, we request that a computerised identity card along with a fishing permit be provided to each fisherman in order to speed up the verification process. Due to lack of identity at present, the fishermen have been languishing behind bars for many years despite the fact that the maximum sentence awarded to them is six months imprisonment," the letter states.

Both the countries, it says, must release all the fishing boats, confiscated at the time of fishermen's arrest. It also calls for setting up a high-level working group involving representatives from the fishing community to monitor and prevent fishermen's arrest and boats' confiscation.

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P.S.

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<http://www.dawn.com/news/1158769/pakistan-india-urged-to-resolve-fishermens-detention-issue>