

Sri Lanka: Again and again the hapless fishermen suffer

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From the local fishmonger to the men who go out into the ocean to fill their nets with a catch, the X-Press Pearl ship disaster has placed the already suffering fish industry in a world of hurt.

“First the Peliyagoda fish market COVID cluster and now the ship disaster has resulted in people being reluctant to consume fish. The fishing community has been suffering for months. Now we are unable to go fishing. From the millions of rupees that will be obtained from the owners of the X-Press Pearl fishermen – especially along the Wattala-Negombo coastal area who are directly affected by the ship disaster – should get relief payments of about Rs. 25,000,” said Dinesh Fernando, Secretary to the All-Ceylon Fisher Folk Trade Union.

Fishermen along the Negombo coast lament the government failed to address the plight of fishermen who have been suffering since the second wave of the pandemic.

“Since the Peliyagoda fish market COVID cluster emerged, we have had no relief from the state despite bringing income to the country through fish exports to Europe,” Mr. Fernando said. “Apart from COVID, the fishing community has been battered by the weather, with several storms and tropical cyclones leaving many fishermen with zero income.”

He urged the state to immediately address the threat to marine life caused by the fire on the X-Press Pearl.

He said some fish exposed to harmful chemicals move away from the area but others cannot do so. “A school of tuna will swim to deeper seas to avoid being exposed to oils or chemicals but fish like mullet that live among reefs are exposed to the toxins,” he said.

“Small-scale fishermen who catch mullet, crabs and prawns are essential to the export trade to European fish markets,” he pointed out. Some had seen their fishing equipment damaged by debris from the ship. “They need health and infrastructure facilities. While authorities are assessing the damage to the environment it is necessary to see the plight of fishermen,” Mr. Fernando said. He said small-scale fishermen number about 25,000 of the 1.2 million people engaged in fishing.

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