

Lack of Safety Protocol Practice in Bangladesh: Intensifying Life-Threatening Incidents in the Bay of Bengal

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Overall, the marine fishing community in the subtropics across the country is not doing well. They suffer beneath the cruelty of nature. Sometimes they lose their livelihood with sudden and frequent storms, and sometimes because of the technical breakdown, they have to spend days in the sea with a miserable life. However, most fishermen do not use survival equipment, including communication systems, at sea. Because of this, the loss of life and livelihood is increasing day by day.

Coastal populations in the country are essentially dependent on the sea. Our Bay of Bengal (BoB) houses nearly 475 commercial fish species. Almost 3 million people in the coastal region depend directly and indirectly on marine fishing for their livelihoods. Fishermen use different types of commercial and artisanal fishing vessels for fishing. Approximately 60,000 trawlers and fishing vessels are in service throughout the year. Over the past

few years, the sea has become very rough due to climate change. Frequent and sudden storms also severely threaten life and livelihoods. The premature death rate has increased due to the unpredictable sea. To overcome these unforeseen factors, fishers at sea must know how to use safety equipment. This will enhance safety and offer additional security against sudden storms and turbulence.

This year, on the 18th and 19th of August 22, catastrophic weather conditions in the BoB destroyed many trawlers. At the same time, many fishermen lost their lives. The Indian Coast Guard rescued 32 Bangladeshi fishermen from 4 trawlers in Indian waters. Another 15 trawlers from Bangladesh were reported missing. On 23rd August, rescued fishermen were brought home through the mediation of the coast guards of the two neighbouring countries. Later, they were handed over to their families through the administration of Mongla upazila. During interviews with

these fishermen, they shared stories of their tragedies at sea. However, all fishermen agreed that they did not follow any safety protocols that were essential for survival at sea. These included, but were not limited to, carrying a radio set, installing wireless communication equipment, wearing a lifejacket during fishing and rough seas, using GPS, etc.

Fishermen in developed countries use trawlers and state-of-the-art technology to protect themselves at sea. Unfortunately, our country's trawler owners, moneylenders, and fishermen are extremely apathetic in using communication systems and life-saving equipment. Due to this, local fishermen of our country are falling into various accidents while fishing in the sea.

A fishing trawler, FB Jasmine, sank in the BoB due to Cyclone Sitrang on 25th October 2022. At that point, 23 fishermen jumped into the choppy sea with their used plastic barrels kept in the trawler to save their lives. They had no lifejacket or lifebuoy on board the vessel for their survival. They were drifting in the storm. An Indian maritime patrol aircraft, carrying out its usual duties, observed this scene from the aircraft. Immediately, lifejackets were thrown out for their survival. Later the Indian Coast Guard Ship 'Vijaya' came and rescued them. The houses of the rescued fishermen are located in the Bhola district of Bangladesh. The fishermen rescued from the sea were handed over by the Indian Coast Guard to the Bangladesh Coast Guard at the zero line of the Bangladesh- India maritime boundary. These fishermen went missing for two days, and their families believed no one had survived! An excruciating scene occurred after returning to their family on that very definite day. Rescued fisherman Md Rakib Hossain (20) said, 'I went to the sea because of my economic crisis despite knowing the ban on fishing for Cyclone Sitrang: I lost all hopes of surviving when our fishing boat sunk in the storm!

Even after two days of the rescue operation, a fisherman named Anwar Hossain (35), who had washed away in the Indian Ocean, was rescued by a local fishing boat. This fisherman was floating in the deep sea for seven days. Along with him, 20 other fishermen were lost at sea. Coast Guard Headquarters Media Officer Lt. Commander Khandaker Munif Taqi said that the Bangladeshi fisherman crossed the country border and entered the Indian waters by floating in the turbulent weather caused by Cyclone Sitrang. Another rescued fisherman named Md. Anwar Hossain is a resident of Charfashan upazila of Bhola district. Twenty-one fishermen along with him went to sea from Noorabad Ghat, Bhola, on 20th October and were hit by the cyclone and their fishing trawler sank on 22nd October. Fisherman Anwar was drifting at sea for nearly seven days. His other fellow fishermen were lost at sea. Later an Indian fishing trawler rescued him on 29 October from the sea.

While interviewing these rescued fishermen, they all agreed that most trawlers and fishermen did not carry life-saving equipment such as life jackets, buoys, first aid, GPS, and radio for marine warning signals. Due to the lack of safety protocols, they became highly threatened by the sudden attack of any cyclone. Many fishermen in the country and their families become destitute every year due to such natural disasters.

Regarding these accidents, Mongla Upazila Nirbhahi Officer (UNO) Kamlesh Majumder said, it is a miracle that the fishermen who fell into the rough sea during the cyclone, and came back alive. However, every fisherman who goes to the sea should carry a life jacket and follow the necessary safety protocols' He added, 'all these fishermen who catch fish in the sea play an important role in the fishing sector of Bangladesh. These fishermen are very poor in nature. Thus local government and NGOs should be

concerned about the sea-going fishermen's safety.

To improve the livelihood of local fishermen, Md Zahidul Islam, Senior Fisheries Officer of Mongla upazila, said



that for the safety of local fishermen in the country, it is necessary to have the availability of safety materials in all fishing stations near the coast. Initiatives have been taken to bring all the fishing boat associations under Marine Coastal Project for the safety of fishermen. The pilot project has started from the coastal area of the Bhola district. Necessary safety gears are being distributed among the sea-going fishermen. Various awareness programs are also being conducted. Subsequently, the project will be implemented in the other coastal area of Bangladesh to ensure the safety protocols of the sea-going vulnerable community.

Apart from local government activities, Bangladesh Coast Guard is also playing an

important role in improving the safety of sea-going fishermen's lives. They distribute life-saving equipment to the fishermen every year, including life jackets, life buoys, torch lights, etc, free of cost. On 10th November 2022, Director

General of Bangladesh Coast Guard Rear Admiral Ashraful Hoq Chowdhury, NBP, ndu, afwc, psc distributed life-saving equipment to the fishermen of the remote area of Gulkhali in Koira under Khulna District under the Coast Guard West Zone. Developing awareness and distributing such safety materials are possible ways to protect this endangered community in our country. Training and regular monitoring are also important to build this huge community's capacity to combat sudden incidents instantly.

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