

IUU Fishing: A Serious Threat to Bangladesh's Marine Catch



Presently Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing incidents constitute a significant threat for countries bordering the Bay of Bengal. The frequent IUU arresting cases by India and Sri Lanka in the Palk Strait, India and Pakistan in the Kutch Strait, and India and Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal are evidence of that incident. However, within the littorals of the Bay of Bengal, no country is better able to address IUU fishing than Bangladesh. The level of intrusion into neighbouring countries by Bangladeshi fishing vessels is relatively low compared to other Asian countries. The IUU Fishing Index measures countries' exposure to and effectively combating IUU fishing. This Index gives every coastal state her IUU fishing score of 1-5 (1 being the highest, 5 being the lowest). Bangladesh ranked 52nd out of 152 countries with an overall score of 2.21 (IUU Fishing Index, 2021). This position in the 'IUU Fishing Index' serves as a 'call to action'.

Generally, Bangladesh is at a moderate stand, and action is required for IUU incidents. Bangladesh is very much aware of ocean sustainability and for the better management of the sea. The country is already a member of Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC). In the face of IUU fishing, as a member of IOTC's, it would be very difficult to achieve its agreed fisheries management goals and objectives through providing appropriate stock assessment report.

Such a situation will result in short and long-term loss of social and economic opportunities and negative impacts on food security and environmental protection. In extreme cases, IUU fishing can lead to the collapse of fisheries or seriously impede efforts to rebuild already depleted stocks. If IUU fishing continues, it could completely negate the benefits of effective fisheries management. IUU fishing in Bangladesh is mainly pressured by foreign fishing vessels, local industrial fishing vessels and local artisanal fishing vessels.

IUU fishing by foreign vessels has recently been a significant concern of Bangladesh's fishing community. No foreign fishing vessels are generally licensed to operate within the Bangladesh EEZ. It is illegal to launch fishing vessels in Bangladeshi waters. Our local fishermen complain that IUU fishers fail to protect the environment and resources from harmful fishing activities, such as juvenile catches and targeting of spawning fish. Furthermore, IUU fishers gain an unfair advantage over local fishermen. They profit unfairly from the sacrifices made by legitimate fishermen who consider the conservation and management of marine fishes. IUU fishermen are “unbound riders” who do not care about the ecosystem and income of other fishermen. They cause tremendous social, economic and environmental losses to coastal and marine fisheries by over and destructive fishing practices.

If we see, our small-scale fishermen can mainly cover distances of up to 50 km, and with the present conventional fishing methods, they cannot fish on the high seas. If foreign fishing vessels illegally catch all the fish in the deep sea, fish will not have a chance to enter the shallow waters. As a result, our local fishermen will not be benefited. For example, Churi fish has not been caught for the last couple of years which is very popular with the Bangladesh community due to its excellent taste. Even Pomfret are now very rare in their catch. The logic behind species declination in the local fisher catch is the overfishing in the deep sea region by the IUU fisher. When fishes are overexploited in the deep sea, they don't get the chance to migrate to the shallow water. So, our local fisher suffers ultimately. IUU fishers mainly use advanced technology such as fish finders, detectors, and mechanical net manipulators. Trawling speed is very fast, enabling them to travel long distances in a short period with a bulk catch. Their net standards and mesh sizes allow them to catch all types of fish and all sizes of fish at the same time. During their unhealthy and destructive fishing, they destroy many small fishermen's nets that generally cost Tk. 150,000 to 200,000 per net. Actually, this is not only the loss of the net cost but, more importantly, the loss of the entire catch as no catch is possible without the net.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that fishing ban periods are an effective strategy for the sustainable growth of fish in Bangladesh. When our devoted fishermen are struggling without fishing at home, many littorals catch all the fish without allowing them to grow sustainably. It cannot be a wise management option before stopping IUU fishing. According to the sea-going fisher, October is the peak month for fishing, recording the largest catch in a month. These 22

days' ban period in October is nothing to them except an opportunity for the foreign fisher to catch the whole stock without hassle. Bangladeshi sea going fishers claim that although 10-12 foreign fishing vessels are captured by the responsible authorities each year, more than 200 trawlers enter Bangladesh yearly. The IUU vessels form groups and communicate with each other via a radio communication system when any one of them is in danger and send signals to other trawlers to go away.

Bangladesh is at high risk of adequately managing and monitoring IUU fishing, which equally threatens the environment and economy. It will increase if governments and fisheries actors do not address it. IUU fishing is a dynamic and diverse problem that a single strategy cannot effectively address. The heterogeneous approach is required at the international, regional and national levels with the individual responsibility and approval of all concerned authorities. Although trespassing from neighbouring countries is the most common, BN and BCG patrols have significantly reduced the incidence of foreign intrusions. According to practical experience of sea fishers, foreign vessels are quite equipped and technical (less noise producer, no light on trawlers, shallower draft, etc.) in nature. With all this in mind, we must develop our capacity. Along with this, internal cooperation through the Joint Monitoring Center (JMC), regionally harmonised fisheries closures, and strong communication and cooperation with both sides can also effectively control IUU fishing.

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