How Do Local Fishers Promote Illegal Fishing in Our Country?

Commonly, when we discuss illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, we only consider foreign fishing vessels. We do not keep in mind that local fishing techniques also accelerate IUU activities. Generally, fishing without a license, fishing in a protected area, using prohibited gear, exceeding a quota, or fishing for prohibited species are all examples of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. IUU fishing also refers to any fishing that violates fisheries laws or takes place outside those laws and regulations. So, in that sense, local or foreign anyone can promote IUU fishing.

I already mentioned the three main ways of continuing IUU fishing, including foreign fishing vessels, industrial fishing vessels and artisanal fishing vessels, and discussed IUU fishing associated with foreign fishing vessels in my previous article titled 'IUU Fishing: A Serious Threat to Bangladesh's Marine Catch' that was published in the Daily Sun on September 20, 2022. However, today I am going to project the entire scenario of how our local fishermen promote IUU fishing in the Bay of Bengal.

Our country has approximately sixty-seven thousand artisanal fishing boats and roughly two-hundred seventy industrial trawlers. Artisanal fishing accounts for nearly 85% of all marine capture. The current regulation states that industrial trawlers must fish outside the 40 m depth contour zone, whereas artisanal fishing fleets must fish inside this zone. Most of the time, illicit actions occur while our local fishers do fishing indiscriminately. Trawling, on the other hand, is practiced to a depth of 40 meters and frequently causes disputes with nearby fishermen. Even with reducing fish stocks, trawlers have started going for Hilsa, a species that is essential to the lives of artisanal fishermen and Bangladesh's food security. Bottom trawling is generally a powerful method of catching fish and other seafood that involves dragging large nets along the ocean's bottom. This technique is one of the worst for destroying ecosystems

and removing valuable marine species that are thrown overboard. It endangers the continuation of marine life and the environment as a whole.

Various sources indicate that the most significant and most valuable species, including tiger prawns and Indian salmon, are all but extinct. Churi and Pomfret are now very rare in the catch. These are primarily the result of illegal fishing activities such as overfishing and destructive fishing methods. Unbalanced harvesting by aggressive fishing methods within limited fishing zones is the ultimate result of biodiversity loss. Years ago, fishermen had to sail for hours to catch a fish, but now they travel up to 20 hours before finding anything. Many species of fish they used to catch but cannot find today. The 270 trawlers operating off Bangladesh can catch up to 400 tons of fish in a single voyage, 20 times more than largest artisanal fishing vessel. It is a matter of worry that future generations will get nothing without a significant reduction in catches. For industrial trawlers, there are time limits for fishing days. A freezer trawler is allowed to sail for 30 days, and a non-freezer trawler for a maximum of 15 days. However, until the target quantity is reached, the fishers do not follow the rules. When they break the rules and stay longer, both activate the production of low-quality fish and cause significant losses to the ecosystem due to overfishing. There is also a rule that shrimp trawlers must have at least 30% finfish in the total catch. Though there is a strict rule for shrimp trawlers, the trawlers regularly participate in illegal activities. A huge by-catch is common due to a lack of proper law execution. Nevertheless, there are strict rules that no by-catch should be dumped into the ocean except sea turtles, but no one cares, even knows. Indeed, there is a lack of awareness among the marine fisher community. They do not know the ultimate consequences of such types of unlawful activities in the ecosystem. This activity is nothing less than a burden of species destruction and accelerates contamination within the system. There is also an obligation to control the mesh size of the cod ends of sea/estuary nets, which must be at least 30mm. For shrimp, a trawlers mesh size of 45 mm is mandatory. Even a gillnet mesh size of 200 mm is preferred. Still, the maximum number of fishermen uses nets that allow juveniles to large fish at once and promote IUU activity by both commercial trawlers and artisanal fishing vessels.

As you can see, with current illegal fishing methods, for every 100 Post Larvae (PL) of shrimp, a collector wastes up to 5000 PL of shrimp. Improper handling and transportation in Bangladesh resulted in around 40% of collected seeds dying before being stored in cultivation facilities. But who cares about losses?

The government restricts the collection of shrimp and shrimp PL in coastal waters. It imposes restrictions on dumping fish and water resources other than sea turtles into the sea. Although there are reasonable regulations on fishing gear limits, the lack of capacity control and catch limits makes it difficult to control illegal activities by local fishermen in Bangladesh. Artisanal fisheries often engage with unreported and unregulated fishing. Some illegal fishing occurs through prohibited monofilament gillnets, as well as violates fishing closures. Artisanal fishing fleets are large in number and regulation can be achieved appropriately by registering and licensing vessels. Electronic reporting efforts and catches can be developed within the system. Such reports will allow us to understand the total fishing effort and distribution, enabling the targeted allocation of resources for successful community-based fisheries management.

Illegal activity is indeed a difficult task to control in the open sea, but it should be noted that the types of activities that severely impact marine biodiversity would not be managed otherwise. Industrial fishing vessels are relatively well-regulated and come with logbook reports and VMS. The government has taken steps to equip 10,000 fishing boats with new technology to detect fish in the sea. Work is underway to install VMS and GMS (Global System for Mobile Communications) on all commercial trawlers within sustainable coastal and marine fisheries projects. It will eliminate the tendency and the practice of illegal fishing by our local sea-going fisher group. For Bangladesh, DoF's ability to close the unreported fishing gap and effectively manage fish stocks requires gathering accurate information on artisanal and industrial fishing fleets, their efforts, discards and definitely landings. The DFO of the Coastal District is authorised to issue licenses and implant other existing rules and regulations regarding marine fisheries. Coastal States must determine the total allowable catch (TAC) for biological resources within their EEZ. Although establishing TACs and their implementation through appropriate yield control is generally considered an effective mechanism for managing fish stocks, the regulatory framework for marine fisheries in Bangladesh mainly relies on input management methods like licensing and equipment restrictions and closed seasons. The gap between the standard TAC determinations is vital to resolution for developing a proper management strategy and avoiding the popular trends of locally assembled illegal fishing.

However, there is a shortage of skilled human resources to enforce responsible duties effectively. Manually it is difficult to control illegal activities in the open sea; vessel digitalisation and advanced monitoring system are obvious to protect the sea now.

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