

**GOVERNMENT OF INDIA
EXTERNAL AFFAIRS
LOK SABHA**

STARRED QUESTION NO:456

ANSWERED ON:27.04.2005

DIPLOMATIC MECHANISM TO SAVE INDIAN FISHERMEN

Bellarmin Shri A.V.

Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

- (a) whether the government has evolved a viable diplomatic mechanism to help save the Indian fishermen unknowingly straying into the international waters and get arrested at the hands of some of our neighbouring countries.;
- (b) if so, the number of fishermen who have been released recently and the number still languishing in foreign jails country-wise; and
- (c) the remedial steps taken/ proposed to be taken by the Government to streamline the procedure in order to secure the release of fishermen at the earliest?

Answer

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMED)

(a) to (c) A statement is placed on the Table of the House.

STATEMENT AS MENTIONED IN REPLY TO THE LOK SABHA STARRED QUESTION NO. 456 (PRIORITY XVI) FOR ANSWER ON 27.04.05 REGARDING 'DIPLOMATIC MECHANISM TO SAVE INDIAN FISHERMEN'

(a) Government is constantly taking up the matter of arrested Indian fishermen for early release and repatriation with the Governments concerned through diplomatic channels and during the high level talks taking place from time to time.

(b) Pakistan has released 800 Indian fishermen in 2005 as on date: 266 fishermen on January 06 and 534 fishermen on March 22, 2005. Sri Lanka released all the Indian fishermen after the Tsunami tragedy. There are about 300 Indian fishermen in Pakistani jails. There are about 738 Indians in Bangladesh jails which may include some fishermen as well, in addition to 6 fishermen arrested in July 2004.

(c) The Governments of India and Pakistan have exchanged proposals for cooperation between Indian Coast Guards and Pakistan Maritime Security Agency, inter alia, to deal with the issue of apprehended fishermen.

During the Foreign Secretary level talks held in New Delhi on June 27-28, 2004 it was agreed to release all the apprehended fishermen in each other's custody and to put in place a mechanism for the return of unintentionally transgressing fishermen and their boats from the high seas without apprehending them.

During the meeting between the Foreign Ministers of the two countries in New Delhi on September 5-6, 2004, it was agreed to have a meeting of Indian Coast Guards and Pakistan Maritime Security Agency to, inter alia, discuss the Memorandum of Understanding for establishing communication link between them and to set up a mechanism to deal with the issue of apprehended fishermen effectively and speedily.

Again, during the Foreign Secretary level talks held on December 27-28, 2004 at Islamabad it was agreed that immediate notification would be provided to the respective High Commissions through the Foreign Ministries of the arrested Indian/Pakistani nationals, consular access would be given to all the civilian prisoners (including fishermen) held in each other's country within three months from the date of their arrest and repatriation would be done immediately after completion of sentence and nationality verification.

During the visit of External Affairs Minister to Pakistan from February 15-17, 2005, the issue of early release and repatriation of all the Indian fishermen along with their boats was again taken up. Government has also advised the coastal States/UTs and various fishery associations to sensitise the fishermen to confine fishing activities to Indian waters and to take steps so as not to inadvertently transgress into Pakistani waters leading to their arrest by Pakistani authorities.

In regard to Sri Lanka, the issue has been taken up at the highest levels by the Government of India. After the last visit of the President of Sri Lanka in November, 2004 it was decided to continue with the existing understandings on humane treatment and early release of apprehended fishermen. Following a decision taken during the visit, an India-Sri Lanka Joint Working Group has also been constituted to deal with issues relating to straying fishermen, to work out modalities for prevention of use of force against them and early release of confiscated boats, and explore possibilities of working towards bilateral arrangements for licensed fishing. The first meeting of this Joint Working Group took place in New Delhi on April 21, 2005.

With Bangladesh, Government has taken up the matter of early consular access and release of Indian fishermen arrested in July 2004

through diplomatic channels. Bangladesh has assured that they would release the fishermen soon and the modalities are being worked out.