

Title: Demanded to take immediate steps to release the fishermen who are in the jails of Pakistan for nearly eleven months.

SHRI VAIKO : The Government has already taken the measures. ...(*Interruptions*)

Mr. Deputy-Speaker, Sir, I draw the attention of the Government, through you, to a very serious matter. Nineteen fishermen of this country are languishing in the jails in Pakistan for nearly 11 months. They are in tears and penury. I had raised the issue on March 13 on the floor of this House. Most of the leaders belonging to many political parties had supported this issue and the hon. Home Minister was kind enough to respond, sharing our grief and concern, and assured us that the hon. Minister of External Affairs would make a statement on the floor of this House.

On 16th February, 1999, nineteen Indian fishermen, all from Tamil Nadu and mostly from the district of Kanyakumari, were on a contract with a Saudi Arabian fishing company, but by mistake, while they were engaged by the Saudi Arabian Company, they entered into the Iranian waters. They were arrested by the Iranian authorities on 16th February for allegedly trespassing into the Iranian territory waters. After 42 days, on 28th March, the matter was brought to the notice of our Indian Mission in Teheran that at least nineteen Indian nationals had been arrested by the security agencies. While the Mission was in contact with the Iranian authorities to secure their release, they were pushed by Iran into Pakistan after 67 days. This is most important, Sir. 67 days after the matter was brought to the notice of our Mission, they were pushed into the territory of Pakistan. Whatever the Mission had been doing in Teheran, whatever the Ministry had been doing, after 35 days, the first note verbale was sent to Pakistan authorities on 9th July. After that, many reminders were sent.

Then the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan informed our mission in Islamabad on 14th September, 1999 that these fishermen were in Pakistan's custody. On 5th June, they were lodged in Quetta jail and then on 5th December, they were transferred to Karachi jail. When the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan indicated that they would be willing to give our High Commission officials consular access to these fishermen so that the procedure for their release and repatriation to India could be taken up, our High Commission suggested that consular access be provided urgently.

After repeated requests, the Pakistan authorities allowed the representatives of our High Commission in Islamabad to meet these fishermen in the jail on 3rd January, 2000. The members of the families have received letters from Pakistan and I am terribly afraid that their lives are in danger. They are being tortured, they are being harassed and the Pakistan regime, the Gen. Parvez Musharraf's regime is playing with the lives of our Indian citizens. It is a very serious matter and as I stated earlier, the whole district of Kanyakumari observed *hartal*, *bandh*, agitation, supported by all political parties, including the members of the National Democratic Alliance.

The hon. Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Dr. Kalaignar has taken up the issue honestly and just before the *bandh* was observed in the district of Kanyakumari, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu contacted our hon. Prime Minister. He himself talked to him. The Prime minister also assured the Chief Minister that steps will be taken and these people who are suffering in Pakistani jails, will be released. When the hon. Prime minister came there during the election campaign and addressed a mammoth meeting in Nagarcoil, the headquarters of the Kanyakumari district, he gave an assurance to the people that it was a serious matter and that the Government will take all measures to bring back the Indian fishermen hailing from Tamil Nadu who are suffering in the jails of Pakistan.

Sir, eleven months have passed by now. The matter is very serious. The Government should give top priority to this matter. Then only the matter could be sorted out. The Government should take up the issue very seriously with the Pakistan Government. Nineteen nationals of this country are suffering in Pakistan jails. It is not a small matter.

Therefore, it is high time that the Government should take up the issue very seriously. Unless and until the Pakistan regime concedes to our demand to release these fishermen, the matter should be taken up with the Human Rights Commission and also with the United Nations. It is not a small matter.

Therefore, I request that the Government of India and particularly the hon. Minister of External Affairs should come out with a statement. Our hon. Minister of Home Affairs has assured last time that he shared our grief and concern and he assured that the hon. Minister of External Affairs will come up with a statement. Sir, the matter is very serious and we are all agitated over the issue. The whole country is agitated over the issue. It is high time that the Government should take it up on a priority basis. Thank you.

SHRI S.S. PALANIMANICKAM (THANJAVUR): Sir, please give me one minute to speak on the same subject. In regard to the same matter our hon. Chief Minister wrote a letter to the hon. Prime Minister and the hon. Prime Minister has agreed to intervene in the matter. (*Interruptions*)

MR. DEPUTY-SPEAKER : This is not a matter of discussion.

SHRI S.S. PALANIMANICKAM : Sir, I request the Government and the hon. Prime Minister to intervene and take immediate steps to release the fishermen from the Pakistan jail. Thank you.