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Title: The Minister of External Affairs made a statement regarding killing of Indian fishermen by Sri Lankan Navy.

HON. SPEAKER: Now, the House will take up item No. 11 – Statement by Minister. Shrimati Sushma Swaraj.

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRIMATI SUSHMA SWARAJ): Madam Speaker, I rise to respond to the House regarding "an incident of firing on Indian fishermen in Palk Bay".

At the outset, let me take this opportunity to reiterate, in no uncertain terms, that our Government attaches the highest importance to the safety, security and welfare of Indian fishermen. Government, through diplomatic channels, has consistently taken up issues relating to apprehension of our fishermen with the Government of Sri Lanka to ensure that our fishermen are treated in a humane manner.

According to our information, the referred matter relates to the incident in Palk Bay at around 2230 hrs on 6 March 2017, in which a fishing vessel from Tamil Nadu was fired upon, allegedly by the Sri Lankan Navy, leading to the death of an Indian fisherman. Another fisherman was also injured in the firing. After the incident was reported, the Government, through diplomatic channels, took up the matter urgently with the Government of Sri Lanka and expressed our strong concern over the incident. The Sri Lankan side has, however, denied the involvement of their Navy in the firing incident. Our High Commissioner personally spoke to Sri Lankan Prime Minister and Navy Commander on this matter. The Sri Lanka Navy however maintained that their patrol boats are not authorised to open fire at any point on Indian fishermen even if they are transgressing into the Sri Lankan waters. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sri Lanka, in a separate statement, conveyed their deep concern over the firing and loss of life, reiterating the commitment of the Government of Sri Lanka to ensure that all Government agencies treat Indian fishermen in a humane manner at all times. The Sri Lankan Government has further reassured us that all possible action will be taken in cooperation with the relevant Indian authorities to investigate the incident.

The President of Sri Lanka also conveyed to our Vice President in their meeting in Jakarta on 7th March, 2017 on the sidelines of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) Leaders' Summit his regret at the unfortunate incident and the loss of life. He emphasized that he has ordered a full investigation. We will be pursuing this matter with the Sri Lankan Government.

It is because of the priority attached to this issue by our Government that the fishermen issues were raised at the highest level, including by the Prime Minister in his meetings with the Sri Lankan President in the last two years. We consider the matter as essentially humanitarian in nature, involving the livelihood and socio-economic practices of our fishermen community. Both leaders had called for finding a permanent solution to the matter. I have also discussed the matter, in great detail, with the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister during my visit to Colombo in February 2016, when we co-chaired the 9th Meeting of the India-Sri Lanka Joint Commission. We have since then steadfastly worked towards finding a permanent solution to the matter.

Last November, based on the feedback, I, along with our Minister of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, held a bilateral ministerial meeting with Sri Lanka in New Delhi to discuss the issue in a comprehensive manner. I also had a meeting with the Fishermen's Associations on this issue. I would like to share with the august House that an agreement was reached at the meeting to set up a Joint Working Group (JWG) on Fisheries as a bilateral institutional mechanism to help find a permanent solution to all fishermen issues. It was also agreed that Ministers for Fisheries of the two countries meet every six months to review the progress. The first meeting of the JWG on Fisheries was held in New Delhi on 31 December 2016 and the first ministerial meeting was held on 2 January 2017 in Colombo. The JWG agreed to a set of Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) which included "an understanding to ensure that there was no physical harm or loss of life while apprehending fishermen by Navy and Coast Guard of the two countries."

Madam Speaker, the Government, as a result of its consistent efforts, has secured the release of 1045 Indian fishermen in custody of Sri Lanka in 2014; 375 fishermen in 2015; 333 fishermen in 2016; and 51 fishermen in 2017. While 85 Indian fishermen along with 136 fishing vessels were in the custody of Sri Lanka, I am glad to inform the House through you that all the fishermen have since been released. Seventy-seven fishermen returned to India day before yesterday and as I speak, the rest of the eight are on their way back to India. We are also pursuing the release of the fishing boats in Sri Lankan custody.

I would again like to reassure the hon. Members that the Government of India accords the highest priority to promote the well being, safety and security of our fishermen. We have strongly conveyed to Sri Lanka that the use of force cannot be justified under any circumstances.

The Government continues to remain engaged with the Government of Sri Lanka to ensure that the rights of the detained Indian nationals are protected and that the fishermen on both sides can continue to pursue their livelihood in a safe, secure and sustainable manner.

[Placed in Library, See No. LT 6590/16/17]

12.25 hours

DEMANDS FOR GRANTS (GENERAL), 2017-2018

Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare – Contd.