

Press Release - 11th August 2022, New Delhi

Fisher people cannot be held hostage to India-Pakistan hostilities: Members of Indian Parliament

Governments of Pakistan and India must work together despite all differences, to find common ground - for the sake of the hundreds of Fishworkers who are arrested and imprisoned every year in each other's prisons, stated Members of Parliament and other dignitaries present at the film screening of 'Kya Pani Mein Sarhad hoti hei?' The film screening and panel discussion were held at New Delhi's Constitution Club on the 10th of Aug 2022 between 4 pm and 7 pm.

The occasion was the screening of Santosh Kohle's documentary film: '_Kya Pani Mein Sarhad Hoti hei?_', on the plight of the jailed fishworkers of India and Pakistan. Filmmakers Santosh and Pragati Bankhele were present at the Delhi release. The panel discussion saw the participation of MPs, political leaders, journalists, and also the families of the Fishworkers who have been in jail in Pakistan.

"It is unfortunate that at a time when Pakistan and India are celebrating the 75th year of Azadi, hundreds of innocent fishworkers who have been arrested for inadvertent sea border crossing are in jails of each other and hundreds of boats are rotting in the custody of the other country!" said Evita Das of PIPFPD, while welcoming the participants to the meeting.

"It is cruel that our fishermen are arrested for the pursuit of their livelihood. They have become prisoners of war in a war they were never a party to...", said Dr. Syeda Hameed, former planning commission member.

Members of parliament who were present at the meeting included Kumar Ketkar (RS), Shaktisinh Gohil (RS), former MP, and Kisan Sabha leader Hannan Mollah, etc. Other MPs who extended solidarity to the fisher's cause in Delhi included Lok Sabha MP from Diu, Lalubhai Patel, and from Gujarat, Rajesh Chudasama. Speakers included senior journalists Bharat Bhushan and Jatin Desai and community leaders from Gujarat. Dr. Syeda Hameed chaired the session.

"When I raised this issue in the parliament, sadly I got a very political answer instead of a humanitarian one... The 600 fishermen in the Pakistan jail do not belong to BJP or Congress, they are humans, and they are citizens of India. Every Indian should keep building pressure so that the govt. listens and acts on this issue and work towards a permanent solution" said Member of Parliament (RS) from Gujarat, Shaktisinh Gohil.

"When Indian students were stuck in Ukraine, the media was engrossed in helping them and a plane was sent to rescue them by the Government of India, but what about the 600 fishermen stuck in Pakistan? Why is it that their lives are not precious to our nation?" asked Kumar Ketkar, MP.

Bharat Bhushan said that "this border issue should be resolved and border lines should be defined... Joint licenses for fishermen should be given to fishermen from both nations. This will ensure that the livelihood of the fisherpeople is ensured even in the event of war...if the governments want to they can solve this issue in 10 mins"

Fisherwomen and spouses of Fishworkers in jail in Pakistan spoke at the meeting. One of them, Nani Ben Bamaniya complained about the lack of any communication facility to reassure the familiar about the safety of their family members in the prison of another country. Issues of consular access, nationality verification, the reactivation of the joint judicial committee on the issue, etc were also raised at the meeting by Jatin Desai, Veljibhai Masani, and Jivanbhai Jungi, people who have worked on this issue for very many years. The panel demanded Governments of India and Pakistan resume dialogue, reactivate the joint judicial committee for prisoners and accelerate the process of nationality verification as well as provide consular access as per the agreed-upon protocol. The meeting also demanded the Governments accelerate the transfer of the mortal remains of the Gujarati fisherman Kalu Vira (who died on 6th July 2022), from Pakistan to India.

Issued on behalf of organizers; National Fishworkers Forum, Delhi Solidarity Group, and Pakistan India Peoples' Forum for Peace & Democracy

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