

## Up against trawling

**The traditional fishermen of North Sumatra have united to battle the threats posed by trawling**

After the New Order government of Suharto came into power in 1966, a new phase in Indonesia's development was initiated. This was articulated in the *Trilogi Pembangunan* (the Three Basic Principles of Development) that aimed to achieve a certain level of development. At the same time, the New Order also took some steps to maintain national stability, based on the assumption that development targets could only be achieved if national stability was guaranteed.

One of the strategies adopted for this was to maintain the community's focus on development efforts. Another was to keep the community away from political activities, including the activities of political parties. At the same time, political parties were not allowed to make contact with communities, especially in rural areas.

The New Order also established people's organizations, such as *Himpunan Kerukunan Tani Indonesia* (HKTI) / Indonesian Farmer Brotherhood Organization) and *Himpunan Nelayan Seluruh Indonesia* (HNSI) / Indonesia Fishermen's Organization). These were actually linked to the ruling political party. Fishworkers were allowed to join only HNSI and farmers only HKTI. Members of these organizations were obliged to vote for the ruling party. Any attempt to establish a new independent organization would be branded as a communist initiative by the government. In practice, this system blocked the aspirations of local people and made it difficult for them to engage in any political activity, except during the public elections, once every five years.

To accelerate the country's development, the government emphasized the

modernization of every sector. In fisheries, the emphasis was on substituting traditional fishing equipment with modern craft and gear, in order to improve the income of fishers. As part of this drive, traditional fishers were encouraged to replace traditional gear with trawls, known in Indonesia as *pukat harimau*. Credit incentives were provided for this. Trawls were seen as having several advantages, particularly greater efficiency, which made possible higher levels of fish production with minimal human resources. Due to these various benefits, the trawl soon became the gear of choice in the modernization drive.

However, this policy did not take into account the fact that traditional fishermen lacked the knowledge and training needed to operate trawls. Moreover, they could not afford to purchase the highly priced trawls, despite credit incentives. As a result, the policy actually benefited the professionals within the sector, and did little to improve the situation of traditional fishermen. More often than not, trawls were owned by investors, who used skilled labour to operate the gear.

For the traditional sector, several negative impacts resulted. With the use of trawls, large catches became possible. But their use also destroyed the coastal environment and important spawning and breeding grounds. Most of the trawlers operated in the same coastal waters used by traditional fishermen, their 'customary sea', and competed directly with them.

### **Public property**

This affected both the catches and the income of the traditional fishermen. Significantly, the concept of the 'customary sea' vanished when the Government of Indonesia declared the sea

as 'public property', as stated in Ministry of Agriculture Decree No.607/KPTS/UM/9/1976.

**F**orced to respond to the protests of traditional fishers, the Government implemented a trawl ban in 1980, through Presidential Decree No.39/1980. The use of trawls was banned in all Indonesian territory, except in Irian Jaya and Maluku, by Presidential Decree No.12/1982). This ban was also supported by a Decree of the Indonesian Supreme Court (No. 8/1988). Despite this, in practice, the ban has not been operational. Vessels using trawls continue to operate in Indonesian territory, especially in the North Sumatra region. This situation has forced the traditional fishers of North Sumatra to undertake various actions.

It is also significant that, until now, the HNSI has failed to solve the problems resulting from continued trawling activities and has not been able to work towards the implementation of the ban. On the contrary, there is a tendency for the HNSI to favour the trawler owners and to even protect and provide cover to their operations.

There are several reasons that make it difficult to implement the trawl ban. The ban on trawling, under the Presidential Decree No. 39/1980, was not supported by effective monitoring and enforcement at the regional level. Other government policies have supported the continuation of trawling activities. For instance, a fisheries regulation of 4 July 1996 supports the purchase of foreign boats by investors. This, in effect, means the procurement of trawlers. This has occurred in Belawan, where there are at present 144 modern fishing boats using trawl-like gear, named otherwise to get past the law.

There is no policy that specifically protects traditional fishers, their gear and their customary area of operation, from the operation of modern fishing gear such as trawls. Although there is a Fishery Law that acknowledges the rights of these traditional fishers to their customary sea, this regulation is not operational.

The Regional Government Offices that issue permits to fish often do not take into account their impacts on the traditional

sector or, for that matter, on the coastal environment. In fact, they tend to favour the interests of the investors.

The institutions that are meant to implement the trawl ban, such as the marine force, the police and the fisheries department, often have overlapping responsibilities. Collusion tends to occur between trawl owners and government officials. For example, trawls that have been confiscated by traditional fishers and handed over to the authorities, are released the very next day.

This situation has angered traditional fishermen. And, not surprisingly, they have taken several actions, such as burning of trawlers. They feel that they cannot depend on the official system to take care of their interests.

The resentment of traditional fishermen towards trawler owners is further aggravated by the fact that they have established a three-tier marketing network of intermediary middlemen that controls fish prices. The price at which the consumer finally purchases the fish is very high. Since traditional fishermen can only sell their fish to the first middleman, they get a very low price. They have no other option but to go along with this system; if not, they run the risk of not being able to sell their catch at all. Any effort to establish an alternative marketing structure is soon destroyed by the marketing network controlled by owners and investors. The Fish Auction House that was supposed to have functioned as the place for fishermen to auction their catches has become part of the owner-controlled marketing system. The situation is similar in fishermen's co-operatives.

Several meetings were held by fishworkers between 1993 and 1998 to discuss this situation. Fishermen and a number of public figures in North Sumatra participated in these meetings. It became evident that to deal with these problems, traditional fishermen in North Sumatra must establish an independent organization managed by the fishers themselves.

#### **Independent organization**

Finally, on 14 July 1998, in Medan, an independent fishermen's organization

was formed, called the *Sarekat Nelayan Sumatera Utara* (SNSU) or North Sumatran Fishers' Union.

About 900 traditional fishermen from three regions in North Sumatra (Langkat, Asahan and Deli Serdang) participated in this event. SNSU aims primarily to draw the attention of the government to the long-neglected problems of traditional fishermen—for instance, the problems caused by trawling and other similar operations, and their impacts on traditional fishermen and on the coastal environment.

The SNSU declaration was presented to the Governor of North Sumatra and to the Head of the Provincial Fishery Department in North Sumatra. This led to a dialogue between fishermen and the Governor. The Governor promised that the problem of trawling would be resolved within a year.

But this promise was never fulfilled. In fact, the number of trawlers operating in the area has increased, even as conflicts between the trawlers and traditional boats have risen.

Along the Sialang Buah coast, in the district of Mengkudu in the Deli Serdang region alone, 51 fishermen were injured between 1993 and 1998. Of these, 31 fishermen lost their lives as a result of injuries from clashes between the

traditional boats and trawlers at sea. There have been several other such incidents in regions such as Langkat, Asahan and Belawan. However, there are no official records of these incidents.

As an organization founded by fishermen, SNSU actively promotes the interests of traditional fishermen by putting pressure on the Provincial Governor of North Sumatra, the President of Indonesia, and agencies such as the Office of the Attorney General, the District Military Office of Bukit Barisan, Lantamal I Belawan, Provincial Fishery Department in North Sumatra, and District Officers (*Muspika*) in coastal areas, etc.

A number of activities have been undertaken to draw attention to the problems of traditional fishermen, such as delegations, demonstrations, presentations, and even the direct arrests of trawlers.

The SNSU aims to create unity among fishers in North Sumatra and to support them in their struggle for social, cultural, economic and legal justice, as citizens of Indonesia. More specifically, it aims to:

- develop economic activities for all members through the formation of fishermen's co-operatives;
- improve the social welfare of all members;



- train members through educational activities;
- defend the interests of members through advocacy; and
- establish fishermen's groups in every district along the coast of North Sumatra.

**I**n order to achieve these objectives, SNSU has developed various programmes. These can be broadly classified as Advocacy, Community Economic Development, Human Resource Development, and Networking.

The present era of reform in Indonesia, where freedom to organize and express one's views is part of the democratization process, has provided a good opportunity for traditional fishermen to articulate their concerns. It is hoped that the establishment of the Ocean Exploration and Fishery Department will promote the welfare of traditional fishermen in Indonesia and particularly in North Sumatra. Hopefully, the mistakes of the past, when the traditional fishery sector was ignored, will not be repeated. ♣

This piece is by Tries Zamansyah, Secretary General of the Sarekat Nelayan Sumatera Utara (SNSU), North Sumatra, Indonesia