

Comment

Don't wait to be swept away

"The hurricane showed no mercy to the children of the sea," lamented a fisherman in the aftermath of Hurricane Thuth.

It was Saturday, 29 May 1999. "2A" or "Hurricane Thuth" travelled at the speed of an Avro aeroplane and hit the coastal border villages of India and Pakistan. About 300 people on the Indian side and around 500 on the Pakistan side perished. Thousands were rendered homeless. Almost all those who died on the Indian side, in the State of Gujarat, were fishermen. After this devastating incident, we at ICSF received a letter from a Gujarat fisherman asking why we do not carry any articles on aspects of safety of life at sea. His query made us sit up and think. SAMUDRA Report has, in fact, carried only a couple of articles on safety at sea, an issue vital to the lives of fishworkers. This issue of SAMUDRA Report is our answer to the Gujarat fishermen's query.

Not only due to natural calamities but also for several other reasons, fishing has been described as one of the most dangerous of all occupations. As Menakhem Ben-Yami, who recently did a report on health and safety in small-scale fisheries for an inter-governmental meet of FAO, ILO and IMO, points out in an article in this issue (page 24), risk is an inherent factor in any decision-making related to fishing operations at sea, much more than in any other sector. When and where to fish, when to run for shelter, what method or fishing gear to use; whether or not to change a fishing spot; when and how to set or haul a gear, and when and where to land the catch are all important decisions that are ridden with risk. And these decisions have to be made in the backdrop of factors such as weather conditions, the state of the boat and equipments, the skill level of crew members, and the economic incentives for risk-taking behaviour.

As Ben-Yami further points out, official national and international attitudes have always been focused on large- and medium-scale fisheries in spite of the fact that the rate of accidents and casualties at sea among small-scale fishermen is higher than the rate that prevails in the high-seas fisheries.

In the developed countries, in particular, modern fishing boats in the small-scale sector are taking on the features of larger ones, including heavy engines and deck machinery that make them sinkable as soon as they capsize or when they take in large amounts of water.

In developing countries, introduction of modern technology has upset the traditional way of doing things. The introduction of outboard motors in the artisanal sector, for example, has led to the abandonment of sails and neglect of sailing. A lack of appreciation of the limits of modern technology; a tendency to take needless risks; insufficient training in operating engines, navigation, electronic aids and safety equipment; first aid and emergency behaviour all contribute to worsening safety standards in small-scale fisheries, even when no cyclones strike, as Ben-Yami points out.

In many developing countries, cyclones are very destructive. As Bisessar Chakalall points out in his article (page 29), there have been no deaths of fishers in the Caribbean islands since 1985, thanks to early warning systems and better disaster preparedness. As far as these systems are concerned, there has to be greater co-ordination between different agencies.

There is need for internationally agreed rules for safety equipment and construction of small fishing vessels, and for the training and certification of their skippers and crew. There has to be a concerted move to enact legislation to minimize the risks and dangers in small-scale fisheries.

Fishworker organizations have to impress on their members the importance of taking safety aspects very seriously. Compared to developed countries, in developing countries human life may not appear to have any great value, but that is no reason to be complacent about safety matters and to get into action only when calamity strikes the coastal populations. Developing countries have to move from the syndrome of responding to catastrophes to one of putting a foolproof system in place.