

Fishermen, the forgotten Seamen

Fr. Bruno Ciceri, cs
AOS National Director, Taiwan

1. INTRODUCTION

While preparing this notes I realize that to talk about fishing, fishermen, fishing industry it was like venturing into a sea as wide and deep as the one in which fishing vessels of different sizes, shapes and fishermen of all races, nationalities are endlessly sailing trying to fill their nets with catches to satisfy the insatiable appetite of our world.

2. FISHING

The purpose of this paper is not to discuss all the varieties of fishing but to present the situation of fishermen working on board of Distant Water Vessels (DWV). However in order to have a clear picture of the reality in which fishermen are operating I should at least mention some issues that are related and affect the life of fishermen at different levels.

2.1. Political

While fishing in international water is almost entirely unregulated; more and more countries are expanding their 200 miles Executive Economic Zones (EEZ) restricting fishing grounds and causing an increase in arrest and detention of fishing vessels violating such limits.

2.2. Economic

Recent data indicates that the expansion of fishing fleet and the increase of fishermen seems to be shrinking in capital intensive economies while expanding in economies that are still predominantly labor intensive.

2.3. Ecological

The total estimated fish catches from the natural resources worldwide have increased from around 74 million metric tons in 1984 to 84 million metric tons in 1994. The oceans are harvested faster than they can regenerate and many areas are showing a declining trend in total catches resulting in a drop of fishermen's earning as well as the loss of jobs.

2.4. Environmental

There is no doubt that marine pollution constitutes one of the major threats to the livelihood of fishermen. The sea is been used in an unscrupulous manner as a dumping ground for all possible forms of waste from ships, tankers etc. Other forms of pollution are sewage and industrial waste, residues of pesticides and herbicides. Uncontrolled urban development for human settlement or tourist facilities along coastal area together with destruction of mangroves and coral reefs destroy fish habitats and reproductions area, force the local fishermen to go further and further from the shore to get their catch.

2.5. Climatic

The El Nino phenomenon with raising of temperature of seawater has negatively affected the reproduction and the migration patterns of many species of fishes.

2.6. Criminal

The indiscriminate use of bottom trawlers can devastate fish stocks. Uses of explosive as fishing method not only destroy large areas of coral reefs, but also result in indiscriminate killing of

all kinds of marine life. Similarly the use of cyanide to catch ornamental fish destroy sea natural resources and balance.

3. INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

There are several international organizations concerned with the welfare/safety of the fishermen and throughout the years have worked very hard to improve it. I will briefly mention here the **International Labour Organization (ILO)**.

The concerns of ILO for fishermen are to improve labour conditions relating to recruitment, training, employment, safety and comfort during working lives and security after retirement.

Because of the special nature of their work and the conditions in which they operate, the ILO has adopted a number of International Labor Standards which specifically apply to the working and living conditions of fishermen, in fact as early as 1920, the Second Maritime Session of the International Labour Conference adopted a recommendation (no. 7) concerning the limitation of hours of work in the fishing industry.

Since then many other international labour instruments governing the work of fishermen have been adopted by various maritime sessions of the International Labour Conferences.

The presence here of Mr Turner and Mr Ardill, is proof of the commitment of the **Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO)**, not only to fish as food for humans, but also to the living and working condition of fishermen. The FAO elaborated a “Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries” which is voluntary, but which has obtained a wide agreement by governments throughout the world.

4. FISHERMEN ON DISTANT WATER VESSELS

According to the FAO report there are roughly 30 million of fishermen worldwide. They are entitled to lesser wages and benefit enjoyed by the seafarers but they work and live under more difficult conditions. Fishermen spend long time at sea, sail fishing vessels that are not seaworthy, their work is dangerous and in the end are not even considered seafarers in the fullest sense; in fact in some instances international organizations such as ITF, ILO, IMO exclude fishermen from their legal framework.

What I am going to share with you is my brief experience as a port chaplain of Kaohsiung in the southern part of Taiwan, dealing with Filipino and Indonesian fishermen working on board of Taiwanese fishing vessels. I gathered this information directly from the fishermen when after a long day of work we shared a few bottles of beer on the deck of their fishing vessels in port for repairs, to unload the catch or loading provisions before the next trip.

5. WHO ARE THE FISHERMEN?

Usually fishermen are young, with very little education or not at all, some just graduated from nautical schools and unaware of the working condition on board fishing vessels.

For many of these so-called “fishermen” is the first time that they see the sea. They are not familiar with the advance technology used for fishing, to avoid shouting and harassment from the officers of the fishing vessel they have to learn quickly; direct experience is the best teacher.

Forced to live in a very restricted place since he cannot leave the vessel any time he wants, the fisherman becomes a prisoner of the limited space of the vessel, often he is also prisoner of his thoughts, because he cannot find anyone to share what he feels inside and after one week he has nothing more to share with his fellow fishermen.

From the religious point of view many of these fishermen are not religiously educated. They lose the sense of the liturgical time (Christmas, Easter etc.) specially the notion of Sunday as the “Day of the Lord” because in the fishing vessel everyday is similar to the previous one. The fear of being laughed at brings the fisherman to compromise or hide his faith and his commitment to God. For him the nature (the sea, the sky, the wind and the fish etc.) is not representing something beautiful to look at, to contemplate, to discover God in it, but a force to fight against.

6. ILLEGAL RECRUITMENT

In remote areas and in small villages the presentation of a very nice and attractive job situation, accompanied by the promise of quick and easily earned money is enough for many uneducated people to become “willing victims” of different forms of illegal recruitment.

After being recruited the applicant receive his passport with a tourist VISA for Singapore (sometime for Thailand, Vietnam or Taiwan), a little show money and he is ready to fly. While the cooperation of corrupt immigration official in the airport is essential in this “human smuggling” it is impossible to trace who are the agents and the contacts people because names and addresses more often than not are fictitious. Inside the airport a new contract that spell out clearly the exploitation to which he will under go is signed by the fishermen, even if he wants to go back to his country he has reached the point of no return!

Others just board the fishing vessel while fishing near the shore without any documents at all only the promise of contract and salary. When the fishermen discover his predicament is impossible for him to complain regarding abuses and exploitation, because of his irregular/illegal situation.

7. WHAT THEY FIND?

When the fishermen leave his mind is full of projects and his heart dream of a better future for his family, just a few days on the job and he realize that all his projects will remain such and his dream will be a nightmare.

7.1. Contract substitution

For the legally deployed fishermen the scenario is not much different. Just before departure the agent asked or is better to say the agent forced the applicants to sign blank checks to be used for the payment of the placement fee (through salary deduction) and blank papers (to be used in case the fishermen will give trouble). As soon as they arrived at the port of embarkation sometimes they are asked to sign a new contract totally different (lower wage, less benefits) from the one previously signed. Under these conditions is impossible for the fishermen to back off from the contract since he is already in the work site and he does not know where to go for assistance.

7.2. Cultural/Communication problems

Generally the crew is composed of fishermen of different nationalities. Language problem and communication gap together with cultural, religious and social differences create tensions during normal working operation but even more in situation of emergency. In open sea the master has the absolute power imposing, dictating, ordering according to his moods and feelings, the crew bear all the humiliations and abuses but when the patience reach the limit they react violently.

7.3. Aging fishing vessels

The average age of the world's industrial fleet is 20 years and it should be source of great concern for owners and governments especially on the issue of safety. Many of these fishing vessels are "floating coffin". Cabin for the crew are small without ventilation and space to move around, mess room for eating and recreation room are non existent kitchen and pantries are dirty, water tank are rusted, safety equipment such as radio, fire extinguishers, life boat or life jacket are old and sometimes unusable.

7.4. Long hours

Although on some large vessels there is a regular working schedule most of the time the fishermen are requested to work long hours without any break or rest period until all the fish have been taken care of. Lack of protecting gear, raincoat and warm clothes expose the fishermen to rain or to the freezing seawater. These factors combined together increase the risk of accidents and exposure to health hazard.

7.5. Lack off provisions and gears

During the first few weeks on board, food staff is sufficient. After a few months when the workload for the crew has reached is peak, the food provisions start running low, potable water is rationed and there is no much variety of food (sometimes only noodles). At this point, the morale of the crew is very low and their temperament is very sensitive any remarks or could trigger violent reaction.

8. WHAT HAPPENS?

8.1. Fishing operations

The fishing vessel may stay in the port for quite sometime or leave on a short notice depending on weather, fishing prospects etc. Its destination and routes can or will be changed suddenly depending on fish run. The time spends at sea could range from a few days to more than a year without touching ground, depriving the fishermen of basic services such as medical treatment, recreation, spiritual support, friendship and contact (letters, telephone calls etc.) with the family members back home. Usually the reasons for not going to the port is to save time and money and maximize the time spent on the fishing ground.

8.2. Maltreatment

The combined effects of bad working conditions and insufficient provisions trigger a situation where fishermen start to slow down their work either as a result physical exhaustion from overwork and lack of food. This situation will provide motive for the officers to verbally abuse and physically maltreat the crew members creating a situation of tension that quite often lead to violent incidents or death. Even if is not always reported they're also many cases of sexual harassment and abuses among crewmembers and specially officers taking advantages of the lower ranking crew.

8.3. Accidents and death

You heard what Mr Jeremy Turner had to say about safety for the most dangerous profession in the world.

8.4. *Arrests and detention*

Because of lack of stocks in international water and the expanding EEZ quite often the Captain move in the national territorial waters, if caught the fishing vessel is put under arrest, the catch seized and the crew put in jail. Before an agreement is reached among government or the trial is finish it take months. In the meantime the fishermen are not working, they cannot send money to their families and are anxious regarding their future. The owner is more concern on the fate of the vessel and often abandons the crew refusing to pay the tickets for their repatriation and back wages.

8.5. *Salary*

Non-payment or under payment of salaries has prompted fishermen to leave the fishing vessels ending up with no salaries and sometimes getting stranded in strange places. The bonus system is also deceptive because the fishermen take all the risks while the fishing companies take all the profits. Salaries are sometimes not commensurate with the number of hours rendered, overtime work is not paid and holiday pay is not given. Sometimes part of the salary is kept by the agent until the end of the contract, in this way the fishermen is forced to keep silence and not to complain to the authority, if he doesn't want to lose the saving kept by the agency.

8.6. *Whereabouts*

Because of the nature of their job (staying at sea for very long periods) or the way that they are recruited (illegally), once they leave the country, it is very difficult to locate their whereabouts.

9. WHAT CAN BE DONE?

I have been asking myself this question so many times...thousand are the answers and the possibilities...here are some... calling for international pressure for the elaboration of good international standard enforced by international laws, disseminating information, offering advocacy and training, being professionals in our Legal/Social Assistance

Conclusion:

To welcome the fishermen in our Centers and Missions is to welcome Christ in our midst. The fishermen need the friendship of the chaplain, the smile from the volunteer, a clean and nice place to relax and communicate with his family, a quite corner to write a letter or send a postcard, a room to be alone with his God. If we will be able to offer these simple things even for a few hours for sure the fishermen will feel welcomed and at home in our places. For the fisherman our Missions and Centers will be really "*a safe harbor*" where to rest, to unload his burden and regain spiritual strength for another voyage.

The visit to the sick in the hospital or to the one in prison together with the visit the fishing vessel bringing magazine, cassettes is the clear sign of our concern and care for all the fishermen. Educational materials and counseling to reduce the exposure of fishermen to the danger of drugs and alcohol abuse, AIDS and others disease.

Particular attention must be given to the families of fishermen, moral and spiritual support should be offer all the time to the wives and children of fishermen. Maybe on the pattern of Seamen's Wives Association, Fishermen Wives Association should be established where is possible.