Tamil Nadu Fishermen's Death – Sri Lankan Navy

What is the issue?

- The news of the bodies of four Tamil Nadu fishermen washed ashore in Sri Lanka has triggered anger in coastal Tamil Nadu.
- This has again brought to the fore the issue of TN fishermen being killed by the Sri Lankan Navy.

What is the demand now?

- The fishermen of Pudukottai district in TN have held demonstrations demanding that a criminal case be filed against the Sri Lankan Navy.
- The Tamil Nadu Chief Minister has written to the Prime Minister seeking an investigation into the recent deaths.
- MPs from Tamil Nadu raised the issue in the Rajya Sabha.
    - In response, the external affairs minister told the Rajya Sabha that India has expressed its concern with Sri Lanka in the strongest terms.

What is the long-standing issue?

- The conflict between the Sri Lankan navy and fishermen from Tamil Nadu started as early as 1983.
- The year 1983 has a significant place in the history of Sri Lanka as well.
- In July 1983, there was a massive campaign against the Tamils in Colombo.
- Several hundred Tamils were killed and several thousand went into exile.
- That was the starting point of the influx of Tamil refugees to India through the Palk Strait.
- It was also the time when the militant groups demanding a separate state of Tamil Eelam were gaining popularity among both the Tamils of Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu.
- India was providing training to different militant groups on Indian soil.
- It is against this backdrop that Sri Lankan personnel opened fire on the Indian fishermen in August 1983.
- In the event, one fisherman from Ramanathapuram district of Tamil Nadu was killed.

What are the conflicting views?

- The Palk Strait is a narrow strip between Sri Lanka and India.

- Fishermen, from both the countries, crossing borders was common which might happen by mistake or intentionally for a better catch.
- But this had never been an issue until 1983.
- So, the killing of a fisherman was seen in Tamil Nadu as a reaction to the move by India to support the Tamil militant groups.
- It was also seen as a move to stop the Tamil refugees from travelling to India.
- But Sri Lanka stated that their navy opened fire because the Indian fishermen had crossed into their waters.

How serious has the issue evolved?

- More such incidents continued, and the Indian fishermen from Tamil Nadu were attacked by the Sri Lankan navy too often.
- This is a huge issue in Tamil Nadu from then on for several years. It was even depicted in popular culture.
- Some media reports claim that more than 500 fishermen were killed from 1983 onwards.
- The TN government in one of its submission to the Madurai bench of the Madras High Court has submitted that 83 fishermen were killed from 1991 to 2011.
- An MP from TN has recently mentioned in his submission in the Rajya Sabha that 245 Indian fishermen have been killed by Sri Lankan personnel over the decades until now.
- This is only those who were killed while in water.
- Apart from those killed, the condition of those who have survived injuries is precarious.

What does Sri Lanka’s navy say?

- In 2009, the war in Sri Lanka was declared to have come to an end.
- One of the reasons that the Sri Lankan navy gave for opening fire was that they suspected the Indian fishing boats as LTTE boats.
- But though the Sri Lankan government announced in 2009 that it has wiped out LTTE, it continues to shoot at Indian fishermen.
- Today, the reason given is that Indian trawlers are trespassing into Sri Lankan waters.
- The reasons have been changing. But the attacks continue.

What are the limitations in addressing this?

- International maritime law gives clear directions on what should be done if people are found crossing borders on the sea.

- Nowhere does the law give the authority to open fire on trespassers.
- Till today, there is no protocol or procedure specified in India on what the fishermen should do when they are surrounded or attacked by the Sri Lankan navy.
    - Should they call the coast guard or the local police station?
    - Who should they inform?
    - What action should be taken by the officials when such information is received?
- Even after nearly four decades, neither the state nor the central government has come up with a structure to deal with it.

What is the way forward?

- In the recent incident, the fishermen of the Pudukottai district have placed the right demand to file a criminal case against the Sri Lankan navy.
- The Central government should understand that it is a matter of life and death, as well as a matter of dignity for India.

Source: The Indian Express

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