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LANDELIJKE INDIA-WERKGROEP

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PRESS REPORT

Dutch government refuses to finance trawlers for India without preceding "experimental deep-sea fishing programme"

The Dutch Ministry of Development Cooperation refuses to finance any more trawlers for India from its development-aid funds, without a preceding "experimental fishing programme" on the seafood resources (especially shrimps) in the Indian deep-sea zone.

It is of the opinion that more trawlers - in excess to nine trawlers already delivered - should only be financed if such a programme shows positive results, indicating that economic returns from deep-sea fishing are possible. This is meant to prevent these big trawlers from fishing in the coastal waters, where most prawns are found and conflicts with the interests of the "traditional" fishermen could arise.

The Indian government, in particular the Ministry of Agriculture, still has to take a decision on this Dutch proposal that was put forward in October 1981. Also after consultations in December 1981 in New Delhi with a Dutch official, no decision was taken. Most probably the "trawler-issue" will be discussed again at the yearly Indo-Dutch aid-spending negotiations in New Delhi at the end of May 1982.

Earlier proposal rejected

The above mentioned proposal on experimental deep-sea fishing came after the Indian government had rejected an earlier Dutch proposal, to have a Dutch evaluation-mission look into the possible harmful effects of the extension of the fleet with big trawlers on the artisanal fishery-sector. The latter proposal, accompanied by suspending the financing of 8 shrimp-trawlers in May 1981, was the result of Indian and Dutch protests against these trawler-deliveries. These protests were voiced on the one hand in a letter to the Dutch minister of Development Cooperation by the "National Forum for Catamaran and Countryboat Fishermen's Rights and Marine Wealth", which is a representative body of 13 major regional traditional fishermen's unions in India. In the Netherlands the "India Committee of the Netherlands" - a solidarity organisation trying to support progressive movements in India - spoke out against the planned trawler-deliveries by the Dutch government (see further on for more information on the "national Forum" and the "India Committee of the Netherlands").

Initially an investigation into the issue by a Dutch evaluation-mission was accepted by the Indian government at the aid-spending negotiations in May 1981 in New Delhi, but finally it was rejected in July 1981 after a concrete programme of investigation was

presented by the members of the mission. The main ground for rejection by the Indian government was, that they considered the investigation as meddling in internal Indian affairs. In the words of the present Dutch minister of Development Cooperation, Mr.C. van Dijk, answering questions on the issue by a member of the Dutch parliament: "The Indian government was of the opinion that her sovereignty would be at stake, having an inquiry into her fisheries policy by a foreign mission".

Insufficient information

The Indian government also wanted first to send reports on the fishery-sector themselves, before having a foreign mission. This has been done now, but the Dutch minister, reacting to another question of the mentioned member of parliament, stated that the information received from the Indian government on the possible conflicting interests of artisanal and industrial (shrimp) fisheries, was insufficient to take a decision on the financing of 8 more trawlers. At the same time however the minister concluded that "it gives sufficient reason to propose to the Indian government a study on the fish resources, especially shrimps, in the deep-sea....." This study was given the form of an "experimental deep-sea fishing programme". The nature of this will be explained below.

Conflicting interests

As can be gauged from the above, this programme was a compromise born out of conflicting interests. On the one hand there has been quite a bit of diplomatic pressure by the Indian authorities on the Dutch government to finance the trawlers. The Netherlands is of course afraid to endanger it's diplomatic and commercial relations with India on account of this issue. Especially now the Netherlands is trying to broaden it's economic relations with India, using even more as before "aid" as a vehicle for this, business interests are

heavily weighing in the minister's new proposal on the "trawler-issue". Pressure of a more specific character in the same direction comes from Dutch shipyards who want to sell trawlers to India.

On the other hand the ministry of Development Cooperation is under pressure of an alerted and critical public opinion, because of newspaper and magazine articles which were criticizing the minister for harming the poor, instead of helping them. The ministry of Development Cooperation, apart from possible concern about the traditional fishermen, wants of course to save it's face as aid-giver to the poor, as is the official policy. In the Netherlands this is a quite important political issue, even though "aid" is often used as a tool for export-promotion.

Big trawler-deal at stake

Some more should be said on the role of business-interests in this case. The trawlers for which finance is suspended now, were planned to be build by shipyards in the Netherlands, as has been already the case with 9 trawlers for whom contracts had already been signed in the beginning of 1981. Each of these trawlers costs around 7,5 million (75 lakhs) rupies. According to a letter of the Dutch minister to the "India Committee of the Netherlands", contracts for these first 9 trawlers could not be cancelled because of "repercussions of breach of contract" and "the aspect of employment" in the Netherlands. Most of these trawlers have already arrived in India.

Much more is however at stake for the Dutch shipyards in the trawler-issue, than possibly "mere" loosing contracts for 8 trawlers. As "India Committee of the Netherlands", we have been contacted by a Dutch businessman who is acting as an intermediary between a Dutch shipyard and Indian parties, interested in buying a trawler. According to him there are plans or negotiations going on the build a big part of the 350 trawlers envisaged in the Indian 6th V year plan, in collaboration with Dutch shipyards. A number of these should be build in parts in the Netherlands and assembled in India, but most of them should be build in India by Indo-Dutch joint ventures. The minister of Development Cooperation, reacting to a question on this by a member of parliament, admitted with some understatement that "there are the usual contacts in this field between Dutch and Indian industry".

Large trawler-contracts linked with aid

The mentioned businessman also tried to impress upon us that our activities against the financing of 8 trawlers from aid-funds, was harmful to Dutch industry and misinformed as far as big-trawler fishing in shallow waters is concerned. On this last point no facts were given however.

We think this businessman gave us the information on the possible much larger trawler-deal, because he hoped with this he could convince us to stop our activities against the trawler-supplies from aid-funds. This was extremely important for him and some Dutch shipyards, because the possible large trawler deal depends on a positive decision by the Dutch minister of Development Cooperation on the financing of 8 trawlers from aid-funds.

In fact if he does want to finance these 8 trawlers, the Indian government will most probably refuse to allow commercial trawler-contracts with Dutch shipyards. Officials at the Ministry of Development Cooperation confirm this link.

Experimental deep-sea fishing

This is the context in which the idea of an "experimental deep-sea fishing programme came up, using some of the 9 Netherlands-build trawlers which have recently arrived in India. These privately owned trawlers are supposed to go out fishing in the deep-sea zone, having been guaranteed a sufficient rate of return in case the catch is bringing in less than that. They should work like this for a couple of months, after good briefings have been given by Indian fishery-research institutes. The programme further includes the provision of specific nets and gear for deep-sea fishing and possibly Dutch technical assistance.

According to a Dutch prawn-biologist, adviser of the Dutch ministry of D.C. on this proposal, there are 14 different kinds of prawns to be caught in the Indian deep-sea and finding out if these can be caught in high enough quantities to make deep-sea fishing profitable, can only be done by "taking out" commercial vessels in the deep-sea. Again according to this man, facts from fishery-surveys are only indicators and statistical averages over samples, but never proof that a commercial trawler will or won't catch enough to make profits. For this on the spot "trial and error experience" is necessary. Through a combination of surveys by institutes (which have been done

enough in India, says the prawn-biologist) and real live try-outs, Dutch deep-sea fishery came into being.

Of course such an experimental deep-sea fishing programme is, according to us - the India Committee of the Netherlands - no guarantee that the traditional fishermen will not suffer from the possible introduction of more trawlers. Even if some good catches can be made in the deep-sea, one is not sure whether big trawlers will eventually fish there as long as it is more profitable to fish in the coastal zone and as long as laws and regulations forbidding them to fish there, are not properly enforced. Take only the case of Goa, where the Marine Regulation Act of 1980 has not been fully implemented and where a chain-hunger-strike by traditional fishermen is being held for months in the first part of this year. The fact that not only smaller trawlers but also the big trawlers, fit for the deep-sea, are now mostly fishing in coastal waters is mentioned by numerous Indian and other sources. For example:".... even the deep-sea vessels already in operation seem to confine themselves to the coastal waters..." (Economic Times, Saturday Supplement on Fisheries, February 28, 1981) Not only that, but it is common knowledge that prawn-catches along the Indian coast are declining rapidly and prawns are being over-fished tremendously. The traditional fishing community, numbering six million people, suffer most from this because fishing is their only and often already meager source of existence.

The "National Forum"

For many years however, fishermen's unions in many different coastal states have been organizing people to improve living conditions for the fishing community. In 1978 the "National Forum for Catamaran and Countryboat Fishermen and Marine Wealth", a representative body of 13 major regional fishermen's unions, was formed. These fishermen's unions, later coordinated by the "National Forum", have been protesting and struggling against the fishing of more than 16.000 mechanised boats and trawlers in the already optimally exploited coastal waters. Violent clashes sometimes occurred. Their main demand was to have an exclusive fishing zone of 20 km from the coast-the traditional fishing grounds of artisanal fishermen- reserved for the 200.000 non-mechanised fishing boats and much more fishing-gear. A nation-wide campaign was launched 1978, which resulted in promises by the central government to draft a new Marine Bill, recognizing the legitimate demands of fishermen. Now -in 1982- only a model Bill has been send to the states, 3 of whom have now enacted laws protecting traditional fishermen. In none of these and other states however, are these laws fully implemented. So it is clear that the fishermen's unions and its National Forum are still struggling to have laws enacted and carried out effectively.

The "National Forum" also put forward concrete ideas on appropriate forms of fishing technology, which are labour-intensive, not harmful to the ecology of the sea and income- distributive. These were put forward in the paper: "Appropriate technology in the fisheries sector in India" in 1980. Among other activities, effective protests have been raised against the use of "development aid" and commercial investments in large-

scale fisheries development by for example FAO, the Worldbank and the Paris-group of investors, which would have been to the detriment of the artisanal fishermen.

The "National Forum" also launched an international campaign against the export of sea-food from India, being one of the causes of reckless overfishing in shallow waters by trawlers and the steep rise of fish-prices in India.

Annex: India Committee of the Netherlands

The India Committee of the Netherlands is a combination of a number of India committees in the Netherlands, who have as their purpose to spread information on political, economical and cultural events in India and outside, in which the relationship between India and the Netherlands is a central topic. In this way we try to support progressive movements and organisations working with the oppressed in India and evoke more solidarity between the Dutch public and these movements.

Among other things we published a booklet in Dutch on the "fishing sector" and fishing policies in India, including a chapter on the Dutch involvement in it. (Blue Revolution in India -Millions of fishermen threatened by advance of trawlers"), initiated publicity around the issue and wrote letters to the minister and other officials, to stop the supply of trawlers to India. All this was based on thorough research, based on information from many different Indian and Dutch sources. To the Dutch ministry of Development Cooperation we pointed out the sharp contradiction between this trawler-programme and the main official purpose of the Dutch policy on development cooperation, which is: improving the living conditions of the poorest groups in developing countries. In the "trawler-case" it was amply documented by us that the proposed trawler-deliveries would be harmful to the living conditions of the traditional fishing community: one of the poorest sections of Indian society.

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one of the trawlers which has recently arrived in India.

