

PRESS RELEASE

Text of the D.O.Letter dated 2.1.2017 of Thiru O. Panneerselvam, Hon'ble Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu addressed to Shri Narendra Modi, Hon'ble Prime Minister of India :-

"I write with a sense of deep anguish at the very unfortunate and needlessly provocative remarks of the Sri Lankan Minister of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Development, Mr. Mahinda Amaraweera, reported in a section of the media, indicating that the fishing boats and gear of Indian fishermen of Tamil Nadu which are in the custody of the Sri Lankan authorities, would be taken over and made the property of the Government of Sri Lanka. I understand that a similar statement has also been made by the Sri Lankan Northern Province Minister for Fisheries and Rural Development, Mr. Balasubramaniam Deniswaran, which has been extensively reported in Tamil Nadu's regional media.

This is an unfortunate development coming at a time when the India-Sri Lanka Joint Working Group on Fisheries met in New Delhi on 31.12.2016, and is due to meet again on the sidelines of the Ministerial meeting at Colombo today (2.1.2017). The above statements are especially alarming when Indian fishermen, have come forward with an accommodative frame of mind, to find a resolution to this long pending sensitive livelihood issue.

Our revered leader, the late Hon'ble Chief Minister Puratchi Thalaivi Amma had repeatedly brought to your personal attention our concerns over the Sri Lankan Government's strategy of delaying the release of the boats and fishing gear of our fishermen which caused great loss of livelihood to our fishermen and their families. As you aware, there are as on date 114 fishing boats of Tamil Nadu fishermen in Sri Lankan custody and our revered leader Puratchi Thalaivi Amma had also repeatedly urged the Government of India to prevail upon the Government of Sri Lanka to release all the apprehended boats which are in the custody of Sri Lankan authorities. The Government of Tamil Nadu has also raised the issue of release of fishing boats in the just concluded Joint Working Group Meeting on 31st December, 2016, and this issue is also to be discussed during the Ministerial level meeting scheduled in Colombo today (2.1.2017).

I also wish to point out that that 80 fishing boats of fishermen from Tamil Nadu apprehended by Sri Lankan Navy during the year 2014 were released only in 2015. Out of these 80 boats, apart from the 2 boats which had sunk at the time of apprehension, 16 boats are damaged beyond salvage, 31 sustained major damages, and 33 boats sustained minor damages. This has inflicted heavy financial losses on the fishermen of Tamil Nadu. Our revered leader Puratchi Thalaivi Amma had

repeatedly urged that the fishing boats and gear of our fishermen should be restored to them in a refurbished condition.

At this juncture, media reports both in Sri Lankan and Tamil media, quoting the Sri Lankan Minister for Fisheries, and the Sri Lankan Northern Province Minister for Fisheries & Rural Development that the Government of Sri Lanka will transfer the ownership of the fishing boats and gear of Indian fishermen from Tamil Nadu to the custody of the Sri Lankan authorities, have caused great disquiet and anguish amongst the fishing community in Tamil Nadu. This is not the first time that such reports are appearing and on an earlier occasion on 1.4.2016, a section of Sri Lankan media quoted the Sri Lankan Minister for Fisheries, Mr. Mahinda Amaraweera saying that the Government of Sri Lanka had approached the competent Courts for permission to give away the fishing boats and gear of Tamil Nadu fishermen to the fishermen of Northern Sri Lanka and to scrap and auction the boats which are unusable.

Such unfortunate and provocative statements are clearly veiled threats to intimidate our fishermen from exercising their traditional fishing rights in the Palk Bay which they have done for centuries. Such statements appear to mock the diplomatic efforts being undertaken by the Government of India to sort out the sensitive issue. I strongly urge the Government of India to register its disapproval of such remarks in the strongest possible terms at the appropriate level. Such statements just before the Inter Ministerial level talks of the two countries will certainly vitiate the atmosphere before the talks.

The Government of Tamil Nadu's case seeking abrogation of the 1974 Indo-Sri Lankan agreement that ceded the islet Katchatheevu along with the potential traditional fishing grounds of our fishermen to Sri Lanka is already sub-judice before the Supreme Court of India.

In this context, I urge the Government of India to take steps to ensure that the boats and fishing gear of Indian fishermen in Sri Lankan custody are returned to the Tamil Nadu fishermen in a refurbished condition at the earliest. I also request you to ensure that immediate action is taken to secure the release of the 51 Indian fishermen who continue to languish in Sri Lankan custody.

I kindly request your immediate intervention in this matter."

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