

**PRESS RELEASE**

Text of the D.O. Letter dated 30.10.2014 addressed by Thiru O. Panneerselvam, Hon'ble Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu to Shri Narendra Modi, Hon'ble Prime Minister of India is reproduced below:

"The people of Tamil Nadu are shocked and deeply grieved to learn of the judgement of the Colombo High Court delivered today (30.10.2014), convicting and sentencing 5 Indian fishermen from Tamil Nadu to death, on charges of transferring narcotics. On behalf the people of Tamil Nadu, I strongly condemn the unjust conviction meted out to the 5 Indian fishermen from Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu - Emerson, Agastas, Wilson, Prasath and Langlet. The Government of Tamil Nadu has consistently insisted that these 5 fishermen were innocent and that the case has been foisted on them and also that the evidence against the fishermen in the court is a fabrication. These 5 fishermen set out to fish from Rameswaram on 28.11.2011, when they were apprehended by the Sri Lankan Navy on the allegation of possession of narcotics.

My leader, Puratchi Thalavi Amma has written numerous times to both you and your predecessor in the last three years regarding this case. Based on the directions of my Leader, the case has also been taken up in several Inter-Ministerial and Joint Working Group meetings. This issue has also figured prominently in the fishermen level talks.

The Government of Tamil Nadu had also sanctioned special assistance to pay for the legal fees of defending these 5 fishermen. Further, the Government of Tamil Nadu has sanctioned special livelihood assistance to the families of the 5 fishermen.

Based on Government of Tamil Nadu's insistence, the Ministry of External Affairs and the Indian High Commission in Sri Lanka had taken up this issue with the Sri Lankan authorities and consistently argued that these are bona fide fishermen with no record of involvement in drug related activities. There was considerable hope that the fishermen would be released based on the records submitted by the Indian side. Based on the close monitoring of this case by the Government of Tamil Nadu, the Indian side had been given hope that in each successive hearing there was a strong prospect of discharge of the fishermen from the case and their release.

In these circumstances, the conviction of these fishermen and the award of death penalty is particularly shocking and unexpected. The manner in which the entire trial was conducted and the orders delayed, gives rise to serious doubts as to whether the fishermen received a fair trial. This is particularly so since, in earlier cases of alleged drug trafficking, where the court found the accused guilty the only penalty levied was a fine. The present case of 5 fishermen was under hearing in Jaffna when the Sri Lankan police filed the charge sheet in the Colombo Court and transferred the case abruptly. Thereafter, the trial was held in the Fourth Bench of the Colombo High Court.

Given all these circumstances, the death sentence against the 5 fishermen has greatly incensed not only the fishermen community in Tamil Nadu but all sections of society. It is quite apparent that these bona fide and innocent fishermen have not received a fair trial and have become the victims of a hidden agenda.

It is the paramount duty of the Government of India to protect the life and liberty of 5 of its innocent citizens who are being deprived of their rights in an apparently unjust and unfair manner. I request you to immediately take up the matter with the highest authorities in Sri Lanka to ensure that the lives of the 5 innocent Indian fishermen are saved and they are released to return home at the earliest. I also request you to direct the Indian High Commission in Sri Lanka to set in motion the legal procedure for appeal within the statutory period in the appropriate appellate forum. Since the Government of Tamil Nadu will continue to meet the entire legal costs of this case, the Indian High Commission may be instructed not to spare any effort including, securing the best legal counsel and support for the effective defence of the 5 fishermen. Failure to take immediate decisive action in this case and secure justice for the 5 fishermen will greatly inflame the already bruised emotions amongst the people of Tamil Nadu."

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Issued by: DIPR, Secretariat, Chennai – 9.  
Dated : 30.10.2014