

Workshop in Chittagong Makes Recommendations for Sea Safety of Fishers in Bangladesh



Forty-nine persons took part in a workshop on “Safety at Sea for Small-scale Fisheries,” held in Chittagong, Bangladesh, on 21 and 22 January, 2008. It was organized by the BOBP-IGO in co-operation with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations and the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock (MoFL), Bangladesh.

The participants represented the MoFL; the Department of Fisheries (DoF); the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology; the Navy and Coast Guard; the Bangladesh Fisheries Research Institute; the Mercantile Marine Department; the Bangladesh Maritime Training Institute; the Bangladesh Fisheries Development Corporation; the Fisher Association and Cooperative Societies; the Boatbuilders Association; representatives of boatyards; experts; the FAO and the BOBP-IGO.

Mr Syed Aatur Rahman, Secretary, MoFL, presided over the inaugural session. Mr Parikshit Datta

Choudhury, Joint Secretary (Fisheries), MoFL, chaired the remainder of the workshop.

Welcoming participants, Dr Y S Yadava, Director, BOBP-IGO, pointed out that while safety at sea is a problem with small-scale fishers everywhere, it is even more serious in Bangladesh because it is a frequent victim of natural calamities. He said the global programme on Safety at Sea and its South Asian component would catalyse efforts to improve the safety and well-being of small-scale fishers in the region.

Mr Md Mokammel Hossain, Director-General, DoF, said that after the devastation caused by cyclone SIDR, discussions have taken place on extending programmes on safety at sea to small-scale fishers. At present, little knowledge exists about fish stocks in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Bangladesh. This aspect needed strengthening, besides development of Monitoring, Control and Surveillance (MCS) in marine fisheries.

Mr Parikshit Datta Choudhury, Joint Secretary, MoFL, described the safety of small-scale fishers as an area of neglect. Cyclone SIDR had lent urgency to the subject, and the government has initiated some measures. The Safety at Sea Project is a bold step in the right direction.

Mr R Ravikumar, FAO Regional Programme Coordinator, Safety at Sea Project, gave a brief outline of the Project and its proposed activities.

In his inaugural address, Mr Syed Aatur Rahman, Secretary, MoFL, said that over time, a rapid increase has occurred in the fisher population of Bangladesh and in fishing effort. Result: fisher incomes have been falling. Fishers are trying to mechanize their boats and venture into deeper waters for higher catches, but weather conditions in the Bay of Bengal threaten their effort. Lives have been lost, boats have been damaged, fishers have suffered grave misery.



Participants at the Sea Safety Workshop.



Top to bottom: Mr Syed Ataur Rahman, Mr Parikshit Datta Choudhury, Mr Md Mokammel Hossain, Cdr Mir Ershad Ali, Mr R Ravikumar.

Mr Rahman said fishers fend for themselves, depending on traditional knowledge and experience. They have no communication equipment or life-saving appliances. Cyclone SIDR had killed more than 3 000 people, mostly fishers. “If we had informed fishers about SIDR, many lives would have been saved.”

The UNDP/ FAO/ BGD Project on “Empowerment of Coastal Fishing Communities for Livelihood Security (ECFC Project)” had provided some help, Mr Rahman said. But much more is needed to be done, including welfare measures for fishers. A national focal point had to be identified for the Safety at Sea Project, and costs integrated into the revenue budget. “We should take lessons from this workshop and frame guidelines on what is to be done.”

Technical Sessions

During the first Technical Session of the workshop, five presentations were made. Mr Ravikumar said the South Asian component of the SIDA- funded and FAO-executed Global Project on “Safety at Sea for Small-scale Fisheries” is being implemented in Bangladesh, India, Maldives and Sri Lanka. The Project is expected to come up with (i) guidelines and rules for design and construction of boats and good boatyard practices, (ii) stakeholder training/ awareness programmes, (3) safety at sea -fishery management integration, and (4) improved reporting and analysis of mortalities/ injuries at sea.

The second presentation was made by Mr A F M Sirajul Islam, engineer and ship surveyor, MMD, on “Overview of safety aspects of small fishing craft in the marine sector of Bangladesh”. Mr Islam said that Bangladesh has some 2.5 million small-scale fishers and 35 to 40 000 fishing boats. Wood is the basic material for boat construction. Design is based on traditional knowledge.

Mr Islam said that during the monsoon, cyclonic weather caused

by depression creates problems for fishers, leading to boat capsizing and loss of life and property. Engine failures are also very common, and boats drift. There are no rules and regulations for the safety of small-scale fisheries or for the construction, stability and maintenance of small boats.

Mr Islam said that building community awareness programmes, and measures such as registration of fishing boats, insurance schemes for fishers and their assets, and implementation of IMO and ILO norms and guidelines, were necessary.

Commander Mir Ershad Ali of the Bangladesh Navy made the next presentation on “Overview of search and rescue operations in Bangladesh”. He said that Bangladesh has acceded to some 20 IMO conventions. It has Marine Search and Rescue (SAR) Centres located in Chittagong and Khulna. Numerous accidents occur in the Bay of Bengal due to poor seamanship, the age of fishing vessels and human error.

Commander Ali said that the Marine Fisheries Ordinance, 1983, mandates the Bangladesh Navy with surveillance duties. The four main players on surveillance are the Navy, the Air Force, the Coast Guard and the Department of Shipping. Funds are short, a national-level SAR organisation doesn't exist: these are the two main constraints to SAR operations in Bangladesh.

In the next presentation, Dr Abdur Rahim, Professor, Bangladesh University of Science and Technology, highlighted “Training needs in safety at sea for the maritime fishery sector”. Dr Rahim classified fishing vessels of Bangladesh into (i) Deep sea trawlers, (ii) Wooden offshore boats, and (iii) Small inshore and estuarine boats.

He said that deep sea trawlers have been imported from South east Asia. Offshore wooden boats operate in a

hazardous environment. Those made from locally available wood last 4 to 5 years, while boats of imported wood last more than 10 years. There is no dearth of skilled craftsmen in Chittagong and Cox's Bazaar, Dr Rahim said. The problems are lack of public finance as well as lack of training in boat design.

The session's final paper was presented by Mr Sk Mostafizur Rahman, Project Director, RFLDP Barisal component. He shared with the workshop the experience of the ECFC project in Cox's Bazaar district during 2000-2006.

Mr Rahman said the Project was implemented in all the eight upazilas of Cox's Bazaar District, covering 117 villages. The project targeted the poor and the disadvantaged, assisted communities in empowerment, introduced economic and community welfare activities, ran a community radio programme, facilitated conservation and management of natural resources through community-based approaches.

Mr Rahman said that the project decentralized implementation of activities. Fishers, especially women, took active part. Lack of safety equipment, inadequate access to weather information, inappropriate design and construction of small fishing boats, absence of a strong data base on accidents at sea, inadequate SAR operations – these were the major drawbacks concerning sea safety for small-scale fishers.

The workshop's second technical session consisted of group discussions. Participants were divided into three groups. They discussed knowledge gaps in fisher communities on safety awareness; knowledge gaps in national agencies on safety at sea initiatives; and knowledge gaps in the service industry on safety aspects for the fisheries sector.

Each group presented its ideas and findings to the workshop. These



were discussed, and recommendations followed.

Recommendations

The workshop agreed that existing rules and regulations (*e.g.* SOLAS 1974; Marine Fisheries Ordinance, 1983) do have adequate provisions to ensure the safety of fishers at sea, but their application at the field level must be improved. Fishing vessel inspectors and surveyors must be trained to interpret rules and regulations concerning safety. An implementable National SAR plan should be formulated, which identifies the roles, responsibilities and capacities of different players responsible for SAR.

The workshop recommended that boat owners be persuaded to provide adequate communication and navigation equipment to the crew. Awareness programmes should be undertaken on proper use of fishing gear, safety and communication equipment, the use of distress signals, etc. Communication equipment like VHF must be demonstrated and then introduced. The community should be systematic in reporting accidents at sea and in implementing safety guidelines among fishers. NGOs and CBOs can play a vital role in this effort.

The workshop agreed that skills of boatbuilders and other service providers should be augmented through training. Traditional wooden boats are inadequate for modern fishing practices. Skill variations among different boatbuilding centers must be looked at.

Participants agreed on the need to diversify boatbuilding materials: FRP is now a common boatbuilding

material in South Asian countries. They also agreed on registration of boatyards to ensure quality.

The workshop emphasized the need for a proper surveillance and reporting system for accidents and incidents at sea. Fishing effort should be aligned with scientifically assessed fish stocks for proper fisheries management.

A 'precautionary approach' should be adopted toward fishing effort till reliable data on stocks was available.

The workshop emphasized the need for a database on the fishing fleet and a proper boat registration mechanism. This would help check piracy, which is rampant in Bangladesh waters. It also stressed the need for insurance of life and property of fishers as a necessary condition for sea safety. At present, such insurance does not exist.

The workshop recommended a national fisheries management plan drawing on the strengths and needs of all the players. Safety at sea would be a necessary ingredient of such a plan, besides resource management, effort control and modernization.

The workshop agreed on pilot-scale implementation of activities in the Cox's Bazar area on the basis of recommendations made by the three groups. The activities included (i) awareness-building at the community level, (ii) promotion of an MCS regime through database building and simplification of registration procedures, and (iii) development of technical guidelines and information materials on sea safety including boatbuilding, life-saving appliances, distress and weather signals, etc.

Mr Parikshit Datta Choudhury expressed his satisfaction over the outcome of the workshop. He hoped its recommendations would be taken up for implementation by the BOBP-IGO and other agencies, and assured full government support for the project's implementation. Dr Y S Yadava proposed a vote of thanks.