

# Role of Indian Coast Guard in Search and Rescue of Fishers at Sea\*

**Prabhakaran Paleri, Director-General, Coast Guard, New Delhi**

The Coast Guard was set up only in 1978. But an umbilical chord already seems to bind the Coast Guard and the marine fisheries community.

The Coast Guard has multiple responsibilities, and strengthening the safety of fishers is only one of them. It needs to develop its capabilities in this respect.

Fishers are vulnerable to disasters of several kinds – accidents, casualties, abductions, alien interventions. The fisher community must ensure that its vessels meet safety requirements and are able to provide essential information in times of disaster. The Indian Coast Guard cannot assist fishers exclusively, but concern for fishers is central to its aims.

The Indian Coast Guard was formally inaugurated on 18 Aug 1978 as an independent armed force of the Indian Union, through an act of Parliament. It is the fourth armed force under the Ministry of Defence – the first three being the Army, the Navy and the Air Force. It has a specific charter for non-military security; but it addresses issues related to national defence. Its motto is Vayam Rakshamah (“We protect”).

The world’s coast guards normally deal with marine safety, maritime security, life saving, law



enforcement, marine environmental security and fisheries. These call for monitoring, control, surveillance and response (MCSR) at sea. Coast Guards all over the maritime world are country-specific, and to that extent asymmetrical in their duties and functions, though they have some common traits.

The Indian Coast Guard too has its exclusive characteristics. The Coast Guard’s duties and functions, as spelled out in the Coast Guard Act, 1978, include:

- safety and protection of islands and offshore structures;
- protection and preservation of maritime environment and endangered species;
- prevention and control of pollution in the maritime zones;
- assistance to the Customs in anti-smuggling operations;
- assistance to fishermen in distress at sea;
- safeguarding life and property at sea;
- preventing poaching in Indian waters;
- assisting in ocean research-related activities;
- enforcing maritime law;

- carrying out other duties as assigned by the Government of India without duplication of effort.

The Coast Guard is led by a Director-General, from headquarters in New Delhi. It has three regional commands at Mumbai, Chennai and Port Blair, and 11 district commands – one in each coastal State, two in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Thus the Coast Guard is a multi-mission public service provider with short-term as well as long-term strategic goals. Most of its duties are relevant either directly or indirectly to fishers and their livelihoods. But it can be deployed for law and treaty enforcement, as well as for humanitarian, diplomatic, environmental and military goals.

The strategic role of the Coast Guard is to protect the maritime zones from illegal activities including infiltration through maritime routes, and environmental damage, and provide humanitarian and scientific assistance within the maritime domain.

## Mission Statements of the Indian Coast Guard

The “mission statements” of the Coast Guard, which derive from its Charter and its functions, are:

1. Offshore security
2. Marine environmental security
3. Maritime zone security
4. Marine safety
5. Scientific assistance
6. National defence

To carry out its missions, the Coast Guard needs sufficient forces,

\* This article is based on a presentation made by Dr Prabhakaran Paleri at the Third International Conference on Fishing Industry Safety and Health, Mahabalipuram, Chennai, 1-4 February 2006.

personnel, expertise, authority, infrastructure and enforcement-friendly laws.

### Maritime Search and Rescue

Maritime search and rescue entails searching for persons, ships or other craft that are feared to be in distress or imminent danger, and rescuing or helping them. It is one of the operational tasks covered under the mission statement “marine safety.” The mission statement reads:

“Prevent death, injuries, fatalities and property loss associated with maritime activities at sea, and reach out to those in distress and traumatic situations at all times in all weather conditions and ensure safety and security from natural or human induced disaster.”

The Coast Guard has prepared a National Maritime Search and Rescue Manual. The Coast Guard is the coordinating authority in a mission of search and rescue which is terrain-specific, not victim-specific. The terrain comprises a whopping 4.6 million sq km in the maritime domain around India. The mission is carried out with the help of three maritime rescue coordination centres (MRCC) based at Mumbai, Chennai and Port Blair. There are also rescue sub-centres functioning from Coast Guard district headquarters at Porbandar, Mormagoa, New Mangalore, Kochi, Vishakhapatnam, Paradeep, Haldia, Diglipur and Campbell Bay. These centres function round the clock.

Communication for search and rescue is provided through fixed communication networks such as GMDSS (global maritime distress safety system), ATS (air traffic services) channels, DSC (digital selective calling) and through INMARSAT (the international maritime satellite earth station);

The Coast Guard has been operating the ship reporting system INDSAR (Indian M-SAR computerised ship reporting system) since 1 February 2003. It is a voluntary toll-free reporting system that will assist the MRCCs to divert the most suitable



*A search operation in progress*

ship to the scene of distress, and also keep track of a ship that is overdue or may need urgent assistance. Participation in INDSAR is voluntary and free of cost.

In addition to INDSAR, the Coast Guard plans to introduce ISLEREP, a system that may allow communication with ships within 25 miles of island territories. It is a VHF radio network system and seeks to provide additional navigational safety for ships as they pass through or close to the islands.

### The Indian Coast Guard and Marine Fishers.

The relationship of the Coast Guard with the fisheries community is defined by the mission statements.

- Offshore security: Fishers who stray into high-security offshore exploration areas will face problems and subsequent loss of catch.
- Marine environmental security: relates to the effects of pollution on fisheries resources and subsequent loss of fish catch. It also relates to the interaction of fishers with marine ecosystems.
- Maritime zone security: relates to law enforcement. Fishers could be direct or indirect victims, or participants.
- Marine safety: covers the entire spectrum of safety of life and property at sea. Fishers are a community that will require protection and assistance.

*Bringing a fishing boat to safety*



- Scientific assistance: to provide scientific support to ocean research activities including fisheries research.

Different types of fishers operate in territorial and close-to-territorial waters. A few of them are slowly venturing into deeper waters. Safety is the paramount objective for a fisher at sea. Record books of the Indian Coast Guard show that the problems experienced by fishers with respect to safety at sea are:

- (a) Individual vessel distress
- Accident-breakdown, capsizing, sinking, collision.
  - Cross border incident-accidents, seizures, attacks.
  - Navigational errors.
  - Pirate attacks.
  - Abductions.
  - Tribal attacks.
  - Medical problems.
- (b) Mass distress
- Cyclones.
  - Tsunami.
  - Seizures and attacks in alien waters.
  - Internal clashes.

Each of these situations has to be handled separately. Action takes varied forms.

Violations of the law by fishers can't be ruled out. They have been involved in illegal fishing across borders, clashes, pirate attacks on merchant ships, smuggling, trafficking, etc.



The Indian Coast Guard has conducted 935 search and rescue missions since its inception. It has saved 3 549 lives at sea, including those of 914 fishers, through 590 missions. There have been 368 incidents of alien firing at Indian fishers since 1983. 100 fishers were killed and 365 injured in the alien attacks recorded so far. This is besides random apprehensions of Indian fishers by bordering states while fishing across international boundaries.

#### **Interaction with the Fisheries Community.**

The Coast Guard introduced community interaction programmes in August 1999 specifically to interact with coastal communities including fishers. These programmes have been only partially successful, because of the limitations imposed on the Coast Guard by other mandated duties. The interaction with fishers aims at inducing safety awareness among them, warning them when weather conditions deteriorate, making

friendly contacts related to public safety, and providing distress relief services including medical relief. These programmes have been appreciated by the community in various coastal states and islands.

#### **Conclusion**

Though the Coast Guard has been able to strike a chord with the fisheries community on safety matters, much more needs to be done. Fishers in India are either traditional or follow a traditional safety mindset even when they operate larger vessels. Mechanisation ensures speed through engines or outboard motors in place of traditional oars which necessitated longer stay at sea, thereby increasing the probability of distress. But on other aspects of safety – inspection of vessels, communication equipment, weather information through radio, life saving appliances, safety training, organised search and rescue efforts, coordination with the Coast Guard – awareness and action are low. A more proactive approach to safety by the Coast Guard, by fisheries administrations and by fisher communities will improve safety at sea.

To sum up, the Coast Guard plays a definite role in safety of life and property of fishers in India. The limitations lie in the disorganised state of fishers in India with respect to safety – low awareness, poor compliance with safety procedures – and also in the modest personnel size of the Indian Coast Guard relative to the tasks. But the Coast Guard has the will and determination to effectively carry out its missions, including that of enhancing the safety of fishers.

#### **References**

1. Indian Coast Guard, INDSAR and ISLEREP (New Delhi), 6 October 2003.
2. National Search and Rescue Board, National Search and Rescue Manual (New Delhi), 22 April 2003.

*Patrolling the high seas*

