European Union

EU-Morocco accord

Through Spanish eyes

The after-effects of the fishery agreement between the EU and Morocco were felt most by hapless citizens

On 13 November 1995 the European Union (EU) and Morocco signed a draft fisheries agreement, which will run for four years, starting I December 1995, and is worth more than 500 million European Currency Unit (ECU). Emma Bonino, European Commissioner for Fisheries, is reported to have acknowledged, "Morocco also has the right to exploit its own fish resources. We (the EU) have been doing so for years, and they know it. We have overexploited the seas for centuries, something that the Africans have never done."

This new agreement between Morocco and the EU sets a precedent for linking development co-operation to fisheries agreements. Particularly noteworthy are two articles of the agreement, which commit the EU to development co-operation activities with Morocco, and the establishment of a joint committee to oversee the implementation of the agreement.

However, some critics claim that this fisheries agreement has been used as a bargaining chip by both EU and Moroccan negotiators to secure concessions in other areas. For example, as a direct consequence of the agreement, Moroccan oranges have received substantial cuts in import duties and levies imposed by the EU. This is likely to have serious trade distorting effects and is believed to be in contravention of rules framed by the World Trade Organization.

Around 121 million ECUS, or about 24 per cent of the total value of the agreement, are being allocated specifically to development co-operation activities. These include the development of seaside industries and port infrastructure, as well as marketing channels for fish products. They also include measures for environmental protection.

Although the new agreement may be a step forward for EU-Moroccan fishery relations, there are some serious implications for the thousands of Spanish fishworkers dependent on the Moroccan fishing grounds. The signing of this agreement was delayed by over six months, during which time the Moroccan fishing grounds were closed to EU fishing boats.

The Spanish were the ones hit hardest by this, with hundreds of boats and thousands of fish workers thrown out of work. In an unprecedented action, the EU provided affected Spanish fishermen with a 40 million ECU compensation package.

Many fishermen in the Galician region experienced a prolonged period of forced unemployment due to the closure of the fishing grounds while a new agreement was being negotiated. This created much tension in close-knit family groups; their only source of income had been cut off, and there was no certainty about when this would be restored.

Social tensions

There were also social tensions as Spanish fish workers took to the streets, holding protest marches and demonstrations. The government used a heavy hand to stifle these protests, which were declared illegal. Fish workers found themselves on the wrong side of the law. At the same time, they saw few alternatives. Afraid of the counter-measures that might be taken against them, the protesters often hid their identities behind masks and hoods.

In the Christmas 1995 edition of its journal Boga, Rosa dos Ventos, an organization of women from the fishing communities of

Vigo, Spain, has included a number on local perspectives on the Moroccan agreement.

The following excerpts from Boga, of interviews with those affected, reveal how hard those times were-

How did the agreement with Morocco conclude?

The following are some of the elements of this agreement:

- Duration: renewable after a four-year period.
- Closed seasons: the same as in the previous agreement.
- Moroccan crews: slight increases, equivalent to one per boat more than at present.
- Cost: the EU will pay around 20,000 million pesetas (about US$ 1,700 million) annually.
- Licence fees: there will be an increase of 5 per cent in each of the last three years of the agreement.
- Landings in Moroccan ports: only refers to cephalopods, and will amount to 25 per cent every year.
- Average reduction in Gross Registered Tonnage: 23 per cent.

As a result of these prolonged negotiations, the EU has implemented some compensatory measures, such as fleet restructuring (in our view, over the longer term) and compensation (but for whom?). The European Council approved support for the boats, which had been laid off.

The agreement is largely regarded as unfavourable for the fleet. It will mean a considerable loss of work opportunities and lead to the berthing of many boats. The unemployment brought on by the delay in signing, which was over six months, has provoked a tough response from the fishermen. The consequence of this agreement will be a significant restructuring of the sector. Our fleet will gradually have to face up to this reality.

The apparent stability promised by the agreement for a four-year period, with no intermediate revision, is a mitigating factor in the bleak future of the fleet fishing the Saharan grounds.

Once again, our fishery sector has suffered the consequences of having been used as a bargaining chip for other interests-to open up markets for fruit, vegetables and tinned sardines. These negotiations have demonstrated the weakness of the Spanish government, in the face of pressures exerted on the EU negotiators by other community countries.

Jorge Paredes is a fisherman from Cangas in the region of Morrazo. At sea since the age of 15, he has worked on many fishing grounds and for 20 years, he has been fishing for cephalopods in the Canary-Saharan fishing grounds.

The dispute over the agreement with Morocco has kept him at home for over six months, something, which he is not used to. The forced unemployment has left him worried about the future, which is still uncertain.

We met him at his home with his wife and children, and we took the opportunity to talk about daily life at sea. This is how he replied to our questions:

After a day spent steaming from our base in Las Palmas, we begin to work the fishing gears (setting and hauling our nets every three hours). The nets easily catch on the bottom during these operations. Sometimes we lose everything and sometimes the nets get completely torn. Then we have to rig another net.

After hauling, the nets are laid on the deck and the work of clearing them begins. This process involves gutting the fish, sorting and packing them prior to freezing. This is what we do between setting and hauling the nets, as well as repairing the torn gear. Any time left over is for eating and resting. There are no shifts. On deck there are 10 seamen, and eight between the hold and the bridge. It's the same for everyone, day and night, throughout the entire campaign, which may last between 50 and 120 days.

There's no time for anything, not even to listen to the radio; its another world, like living in a capsule. From time to time, it is possible to rest your weary legs without actually sleeping. It's a kind of dream world, where you live half awake and half asleep.

As far as earnings are concerned, we take a share rather than a fixed wage. Seamen are paid 10 per cent of the earnings. We never know until the end how much that is worth. The average earnings are 150,000 pesetas. It is a kind of donkey's work that very few can bear. Men from the countryside crack up during the first campaign. We seafarers believe that we have it in our blood, inherited from our grandparents, who also went to sea. Or perhaps it's because we begin as children and our bodies become used to it. We are also driven by the need to earn a living.

We spoke with Jorge about many other things. Our discussions should not end here, because there are so many amazing things to learn about this kind of life and work. The words 'to learn are hardly appropriate, as one can not really learn about these things unless one actually experiences them first hand. The reality is that none of us on land should be allowed to say that we know about life at sea.

Such accounts as given by the likes of Jorge make a big impression on us when we hear them. They may remain in our memories long after they have gone to sea. But ultimately our memories fade, like them, into the sea.

Fita and Loli are the wives and Patricia, the daughter, of fishermen who were struggling to defend their work on the Moroccan fishing grounds. They narrated to us their experiences during the families' times of uncertainty:

What has the Moroccan conflict meant for you?

Loli: I lived through it under a lot of strain, always looking for solutions. We wondered how we could explain the meaning of our protests and marches. Our cry was: “Don’t ignore us! We are here because we need to work.” We were not talking about money, just about having some hope of returning to some form of dignified work. People showed us no solidarity. We were even criticized by the very organizations that we had formed, although we never tried to harm anyone. We have lived in total impotence.

Fita: It was the same for us. Everywhere we found doors closed. When we were called for meetings, we were promised many things. They told us everything was rosy, but all we could see was black. The truth is that it is difficult to explain in words.

How was life at home?

Fita: It’s not that we lived very badly, in the sense that I had all my children with me. We explained what was going on, although often we did not tell them everything so that they would not worry about this enormous problem.

My husband and I fell out because he was very ill, and any little thing provoked him. We always ended up arguing. Those were very anxious days, seeing my husband go without sleep, although I slept less due to the knot I had in my stomach, which would rise to my throat and seem to throttle me. It is difficult to explain because everything was so acute, so big, so powerful, that I wondered how on earth it could be sorted out. And I cried alone, searching for some solution. It was like trying to take a bull by the horns, but not being strong enough to do so.

The authorities say they gave you sufficient support.

Fita: Sufficient? If any government functionary, or even a minister, can live with 75 or 100 thousand pesetas, with a family of six, then he should come here and explain how to, because I don’t know how to do so.

How did you help your husband?

Fita: Accompanying them everywhere, to the demonstrations, to the protest actions, and telling them that things would work out. At those times, I was the strength, because he cracked up before me. Also, I had the support of our children.

How did society react?

Fita: “That was much worse. I had confrontations with many people, but I know how to keep quiet when I have to, although I explained the reasons for our actions. Wherever we went, there were strike-breakers and I wondered why. I felt powerless. For instance, why did they stop five of us from entering the Labour Office? Where is the democracy in this?

The truth is that everyone closed their doors to us, and this was the worst injustice.

How did the children cope?

Patricia: At the start, we hardly noticed any difference. We saw our father corning home and we did not know when he would leave. When you see your father coming home from sea, you always hope that he will give you what you need, like new clothes. But this was different, because, as his stay at home got longer, and knowing what was going on, we were no longer able to ask for things that we had always taken for granted.

Things were not very clear for us kids. We depended on our father completely, as there was no other income. The atmosphere was tense. When we spoke, he shouted at us to shut up! Previously, our father had never taken against us. Now every little thing, even a joke, was seen as an argument.

We always helped our fathers when there was any discussion, whatever the theme. They never allowed us to go with them into the streets; to the demonstrations, yes, but when there was a protest march, we stayed at home with the radio on until they returned.

What happened on the marches?

Fita: For us, it was a unique-experience. We found ourselves persecuted by the strike- breakers in an incredible way. They were armed to the teeth and they followed us everywhere. They were already waiting for us when we left the boats.

Loli: We did nothing that called for the protection of the people.

Patricia: On hearing such things, we waited in trepidation, wondering if our fathers would come home safely. When they went out, they told us “Take care, don’t turn out the lights, let no one go to the window”, because the police were always watching the house and had the phones tapped.

Loli: The strike-breakers, and even the Governor, thought that they were dealing with uneducated, crazy and ignorant people. They did not realize what was being planned or how well organized we were. The fishermen took them quite by surprise. While the strike-breakers had many resources, and the fishermen had none, other than the capacity to think and act, we were able to outsmart them in every sense.

Fita: They treated us like real delinquents. When we went to see the Governor, I told him personally that he had visited my home, that he knew my husband, who had now masked his identity, and all my family. There are so many amazing stories to be told about those times. After all these happenings, we realize how much there still is to learn about life. What a lot we still have to learn!

How are you facing up to the future?

Loli: For the time being, we see no future, because the outcome is unjust and has left us full of hunger and frustration. The ensuing anxiety and all the other tensions have repercussions on the children. They realize that we are not sleeping and that we have lost our appetites. I try to explain things as simply as possible, because I don't want them to have to go through the same problems.

I have a son on the same fishing ground. He phoned to tell me that a Moroccan had cut his finger. The thought that he was fighting with them filled me with disgust. He told me not to worry, that it was a very small cut, and he was happy.

I feel so impotent facing the future. There has to be some solution, but before we can see any results, we have to use whatever strength we have to defend ourselves, to face up to other governments. It seems that there is no alternative...

Fita: I don't believe that we can continue to fish, because we're getting less and less, and it doesn't matter to anybody, because they are trying to deprive us of fishing. I don't know what the future holds or what alternatives people will have. Where are we going to look for fish, if, as they say, all the fishing grounds are overfished? The solution that we had was in this fishing ground and now that is also failing us.

What alternatives do you see for the young?

Fita: Young people will have to struggle if there is no' work at sea. They will have to struggle for it on land, to struggle to set up businesses, for which the government must lend them money. But it is not doing anything and we don't see alternatives.

Patricia: In our house, all of us children are old enough. We continue studying only because we have not found work and we are taking advantage of the time to make more of ourselves. This is what my father says: "I have some older children whose future could have almost been determined, but that hasn't happened". He sees very bleak prospects because he is the only person providing an income for the household.

These excerpts are translated from the Christmas 1995 edition of Boga, published by Rosa Dos Ventos, based in Vigo in Galicia, north-west Spain