

On Land, at Sea, Lives Matter

Cyclone Ockhi, which caused large-scale destruction in southern India, should open the eyes of officialdom to both the landward and seaward dimensions of cyclones

As natural disasters go, Cyclone Ockhi which, between 30 November and 2 December 2017, took the lives of hundreds of fishers, injured many others and destroyed numerous fishing vessels at sea, stands out for the disproportionate damage it caused at sea than on land. The dead included not only fishers from the south Indian states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala who were on short- and long-haul fishing trips, but also undocumented migrant fishers from faraway places. This, arguably, is the first-ever cyclone that took away lives at sea on the southwest coast of India, but spared those on land. There are heart-rending stories of survivors who battled the sea for several days before they were rescued (see reports elsewhere in this issue of *SAMUDRA Report*).

Several explanations have been presented for this tragedy on the waves—from the rapid genesis and intensification of the cyclone, which cut short the time available for response, to the rarity of such storms on the southern Arabian Sea coast. But even under these circumstances, many lives, especially of those who ventured out on 29 November, could have been saved if there had been a timely response from the authorities. Search-and-rescue operations, particularly in relation to long-haul vessels, were hampered by poor knowledge about the location of these fishing vessels at sea, especially of those engaged in tuna and shark fishing, employing longlines and encircling gillnets from Thoothoor, far away from their base fishing port. There was insufficient co-ordination between different agencies.

As storm surges or large waves pushed inshore by cyclonic winds have generally led to the most number of casualties of fishers, the meteorological department and disaster managers have tended to focus on landfall. In the case of Ockhi, which only skirted the coasts of southern Kerala and Tamil Nadu and did not make landfall, its terrible impact on those at sea was almost missed out in the absence of a reporting mechanism for long-haul fishing vessels before they go out on fishing trips.

Clearly, the solutions for effectively disseminating warnings to fishers on nearshore vessels, or on the coast, will have to be different from disseminating warnings to fishers on multi-day fishing trips (such as Thoothoor's tuna and shark fishermen) in faraway fishing grounds. What they need is a culture of safety and disaster-risk reduction integrated into their work in fishing, which needs training. The fisheries and maritime safety authorities have a key role to play in this endeavour. The key learnings from Ockhi for the fisheries sector range from the urgent need to comprehensively address fishers' safety at sea in all areas of fishing operations, and the importance of

disaster-management plans to pay attention to practical and efficient early-warning systems, which reach the last mile, to well-equipped boats and trained fishers to meet emergencies. Whatever be the shortcomings of regulatory compliance, the authorities at all levels, however, have to act with alacrity to save lives at sea in an emergency, paying heed to complaints from families and friends of missing fishers.

The path of destruction in the aftermath of Ockhi underscores the magnitude of fleet migration along the western seaboard from the southern states to the northern ones. Considering the long coastline, constant

back-and-forth fleet migration both in territorial waters and the exclusive economic zone, burgeoning employment of migrant fishers with no prior knowledge of fishing, whatsoever, and an ever-expanding fishing ground from the seaboard to the high seas, the safety-at-sea regime has to be fully integrated into fisheries management. In regard to multi-day fishing vessels, in particular, there has to be a fool-proof

reporting mechanism of vessel position while on a fishing trip.

The central and state authorities in a federal system also need a coherent national perspective and co-ordinated approach to marine fishing. Different coastal states of India have to act as proxy flag, coastal and port-state authority, respectively, to improve safety and ensure effective fisheries management, considering that fishing vessels registered in one state often undertake fishing operations in the waters off a second state and land their catches in ports under the jurisdiction of a third state.

In May 1999, after a severe cyclone on the Arabian Sea struck the Pakistan and India coasts, a comment in this journal urged everyone to act and not wait to be swept away. We hope available international guidelines on sea safety, emergency response, and frameworks for disaster reduction in the context of fisheries, under the auspices of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), especially the SSF Guidelines, can assist in preparing emergency response and disaster-preparedness mechanisms to save lives and protect fishing assets at sea. India has adopted the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 and is to implement the SSF Guidelines. Both the Guidelines and the Sendai Framework promote and protect all human rights and provide an excellent opportunity to improve emergency response and to reduce disaster risk. Cyclone Ockhi should be an eye-opener to recognize not only the landward but also seaward dimensions of cyclones. We need to save lives both on land and at sea. 

