

KERALA SWATANTRA MATSYA THOZHILALI FEDERATION (KSMTF)
(Kerala Independent Fishworkers Federation)

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ASEAN –INDIA FTA: LOSS OF LIVELIHOODS IN FISHERIES AND AGRICULTURE

Thiruvananthapuram: Reacting to reports from New Delhi on the UPA Cabinet approval of the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (FTA) text, the Kerala Independent Fishworkers Federation said that the FTA will lead to a huge loss of livelihoods in the fisheries and agriculture sector especially in Kerala.

With talks initiated in 2003, the ASEAN-India FTA has been mired in controversy since day one. Thursday's hasty cabinet approval despite objections from senior Ministers from Kerala such as Defence Minister AK Anthony and Overseas Indian Affairs Minister Vayalar Ravi flies in the face of assurances given by the UPA Government to protect the livelihoods of millions engaged in agriculture and fisheries.

In 2006 Congress President Sonia Gandhi in her then capacity as National Advisory Council Chairperson had written a cautionary letter to the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh asking for a careful scrutiny of the ASEAN-India FTA given the agrarian crisis and its potential impacts in sectors such as edible oil, coffee, tea and pepper. Since then with the break of the financial crisis and the continuing agrarian distress, talks have proceeded at a snails pace.

'At a time of deep financial and agrarian crisis, many countries are shunning free trade policies and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's contention that India will be isolated in the world economy if it does not sign this FTA is not based on an assessment of ground realities' stated T Peter, President of KSMTF.

The FTAs direct impact would hit Kerala severely given the huge numbers of people involved in fishing, fish vending and processing. In recent years fish stocks have depleted (due to over fishing by trawlers and foreign vessels) and prices have crashed (due to imports of cheaper varieties) forcing many to give up fishing. *'Further liberalisation of fisheries to increase trade will deepen the problems of the fishing community'*, contends Peter.

From the ASEAN, the biggest threats of imports will come from Thailand (the world's largest exporter of farmed shrimp) and Vietnam (world's eight largest seafood exporter). The FTA is likely to permit zero tariff imports of sardines, mackerels, anchovies and crabs. Cheaper imports of local popular varieties such as cuttlefish, squid, shrimp, sole and pomfret will spell doom for fishing communities.

KSMTF further warned that if the FTA allows Thai fishing vessels to access Indian marine waters, it would only intensify overfishing and the damage to fishery stocks, especially given the lack of prudent national fishing regulations and policies in the country.

Afsar Jafri from Focus on the Global South a regional research and campaign group that monitors trade liberalisation initiatives in Asia said that Malaysia's palm oil industry has been a strong lobby for the FTA. *'Malaysia is the world's largest producer of this vegetable oil and its duty free import into the Indian market should not be on the cards. Other sectors that will be adversely impacted include small scale tea, coffee, coconut, rubber and pepper farmers'*, said Jafri.

Jafri added that the real winners from this FTA will not be farmers and fishworkers but transnational companies (TNCs) as the ASEAN and Indian governments will ensure their access to lucrative markets, coastal waters and investment opportunities.

'We do not believe that adequate scrutiny of this FTA has been done. For one agriculture and fisheries groups in Kerala and elsewhere have not been consulted, said Peter. KSMTF stated that only a strong and united platform which also includes farmers, workers and other progressive groups can halt this flawed agenda which will affect the lives of millions across the country. (Ends)

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