National Maritime Foundation

www.maritimeindia.org

Six Steps to Combatting IUU Fishing

Author: Vijay Sakhuja *

Date: 29 February 2016

The 2014 Global Ocean Commission report *From Decline to Recovery: A Rescue Package for the Global Ocean* has likened the high seas to a 'failed State' where 'lawlessness verging on anarchy' prevails and it is free for 'plunder and neglect'. Eighteen months after the report was released, the authors have concluded that although threats to the health of the oceans persist, there have been tangible changes and the global community is willing to work to reduce the vulnerability of the seas.

One of the important issues of concern for the Global Ocean Commission was Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, also referred as 'pirate fishing'. The IUU fishing involves operations that do not adhere to national or international laws, unlicensed fishing operations, illegal transshipments or transfers at sea of fish catch to other vessels, catching protected species, and not adhering to the regulations in force announced by the local and relevant regional fishery management organization (RFMO).

IUU fishing affects the sustainability of fish stocks. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, nearly 50 percent of marine fish stocks is fully exploited, 15-18 per cent is over exploited, and 10 per cent are already depleted. Further, the annual global fish catch in 2010 was about 109 million metric tons, but official reports submitted by more than 200 countries and territories totaled 77 million which means that 32 million metric tons of fish goes unreported.

The Global Ocean Commission listed six steps to combat and end IUU fishing to promote transparency and institute accountability of the fishing industry. First, it called for mandatory requirements of IMO (International Maritime Organization) numbers and tracking arrangements similar to those on merchant ships for all vessels engaged in fishing in the high seas. It is mandatory for all merchant vessels above 300 tons to install the Automatic Identification System (AIS), which helps in tracking vessels at sea. There are reports of fishing vessels turning off the AIS devices to prevent detection and

tracking and continue IUU fishing operations, which according to the Commission is a worrying trend.

Second, the Commission was concerned about 'at-sea transshipment' of fish catch. Fishing vessels are known to operate for long periods and transfer the catch to other vessels thereby successfully circumventing coastal and port State control regimes. These vessels are difficult to detect because they generally operate in disputed waters or where the law enforcement is weak. Further, the maritime enforcement agencies seldom patrol outside their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) and IUU fishers pursue their business undetected with total impunity.

Third, the Commission is hoping that all port States become Party to the FAO Agreement on Port State Measures to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate IUU Fishing (PSMA). By January 2016, 19 States had signed the PSMA and the Commission was hopeful that other States would support the effort to ensure its entry into force by July 2016.

Fourth, the Commission was of the view that real-time information sharing and global data on high seas fishing vessels and their activities is critical to deter IUU fishing as also to help trace defaulting vessels. This requires robust maritime domain awareness, which is technology intensive. In the Indian Ocean, the Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) in India and the Singapore-based Information Fusion Centre (IFC) established at Changi Command and Control Centre (CC2C), serve as effective MDA hubs. Currently, these are meant for strengthening maritime and coastal security against unusual or suspicious movements and activities at sea and can be used for monitoring of IUU fishing activity.

Fifth, the consumers of seafood have an important role to play in preventing, deterring, and eliminating IUU fishing. At the State level, vessels suspected of IUU fishing operations can be prevented to land fish brought to port for trade. Further, fish traceability is an effective mechanism to curb IUU fishing. For instance, the US National Ocean Council Committee to Combat Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing and Seafood Fraud has proposed a seafood traceability system that will collect data about harvest, landing, and chain of custody of fish and fish products brought into the United States and if the catch is found suspicious, list it as seafood fraud.

Sixth, the civil society organizations can play an important role as watchdogs and compliment international, regional and State efforts to curb IUU fishing. It is a well-known fact that laws and regulations are difficult to enforce in international waters. Also, labour onboard such vessels are largely undocumented who work in inhumane conditions. Some of these are refugees or migrants who take risks for livelihood and constantly fear for their safety and security. For instance, European Union Commissioner for fisheries, maritime affairs and environment has been asked to

approach Thailand to institute reforms in its fishing industry to ensure that its exports are not from IUU fishing and human rights of the fishermen were upheld.

It is true that sea is an important source of protein for nearly 4.3 billion people but IUU fishing adversely affect the ecological, economic and social conditions of countries. Further, IUU fishing is an important issue of concern under the ten targets contained in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14. It therefore becomes incumbent on the States to understand the impact of IUU fishing on the marine ecosystem and food supply chain both for life at sea and humanity ashore. This can be achieved by developing effective measures to enhance transparency, institute accountability, and develop technological capability to monitor IUU fishing in international waters.

****

* Dr Vijay Sakhuja is Director National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi. He can be reached at sakhuja.v@gmail.com