

Indian fishermen in foreign custody

2345. SHRI A.W. RABI BERNARD: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state :

(a) the total number of Indian fishermen and their fishing boats in the custody of Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh at present, State-wise, including Tamil Nadu;

(b) the details of the steps taken/being taken by the Government to secure release of these fishermen; and

(c) the steps taken by Government to rehabilitate fishermen and their families whose boats have been confiscated by these countries?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS [GENERAL (RETD.) V. K. SINGH]: (a) to (c) As on 1 July 2014 there are 249 fishermen believed to be Indian and approximately 740 fishing boats that are in the custody of the Pakistan authorities. Of the 249 fishermen, Consular Access by Pakistan authorities has been provided to 78 fishermen; Indian nationality of 35 has been confirmed while nationality status of remaining 43 fishermen is still to be confirmed. The State/UT-wise detail of the 35 Indian fishermen is: (i) Gujarat-33 fishermen (ii) Maharashtra-1 fisherman; and (iii) Daman&Diu-1 fisherman.

As on 22 July 2014 there are 43 Indian fishermen and 56 Indian fishing vessels in the custody of Sri Lankan authorities. All these Indian fishermen belong to the State of Tamil Nadu.

There are no Indian fisherman presently in the custody of Bangladesh authorities.

In the case of Pakistan, Government regularly takes up the demand for consular access and early release and repatriation of all prisoners including Indian fishermen. The India-Pakistan Judicial Committee consisting of retired judges from both countries visits jails in both countries to ensure humane treatment and expeditious release of prisoners including fishermen, who have completed their prison term.

An India-Sri Lanka Joint Working Group (JWG) dealing with issues related to inadvertent crossing by fishermen, preventing use of force against Indian fishermen, early release of confiscated boats and for exploring possibilities of working towards a bilateral agreement, has been in operation since 2004. Additionally, in 2014, two rounds of India-Sri Lanka Fishermen's Associations talks have taken place in Chennai (27 January 2014) and Colombo (12 May 2014) towards resolution of fishermen issues. The matter has also been taken up during meetings at various levels, including during the recent meeting between PM and Sri Lankan President in New Delhi on 27 May

2014 and in the bilateral discussions between EAM and the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister in New Delhi on 11 July 2014.

Ministry of Agriculture is the designated nodal agency for payment of compensation to fishermen lodged in Pakistani jails. Additionally a Soft Loan Package for replacement of fishing vessels held in captivity in Pakistan authorities implemented by the Marine Exports Development Authority (MPEDA).

Opening of RPO in Odisha

†2346. SHRI BHUPINDER SINGH: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state :

(a) whether Government is opening a Regional Passport Office (RPO) at Bhawanipatna in Kalahandi district of Odisha to meet the necessity of the people of KBK (Kalahandi-Balangir-Koraput) adjoining districts of Odisha;

(b) whether Government has computerized the passport offices of the country and whether it has facilitated to open new centres on outsource basis, if so, the list of new centres that Government is planning to open;

(c) whether Government is planning to open centres in any town in western part of Odisha, specifically in Bhawanipatna; and

(d) if not, whether Government can open a centre at Bhawanipatna in this financial year 2014-15?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS [GENERAL (RETD.) V. K. SINGH]: (a) to (d) With the aim to deliver Passport-related services to the citizens in a timely, transparent, more accessible, reliable manner and in a comfortable environment through streamlined processes, the Government has implemented IT-driven Passport Seva Project (PSP) in public-private-partnership mode which includes *inter alia* establishing and operationalising of 77 Passport Seva Kendras (PSKs) across the country as extended arms of the existing 37 Passport Offices. A list of the 77 PSKs is given in Statement (*See* below). All the Passport Offices and PSKs are computerized. The entire passport application process is online and streamlined, including payment of Passport Fees. The number of public dealing counters has been increased from the erstwhile 350 to 1610 in the new system and public dealing hours have gone up from 4 hours to 7 hours a day. Government is currently undertaking a comprehensive review of opening of new Passport Offices and Passport Seva Kendras in all parts of the country including Odisha.

†Original notice of the question was received in Hindi.