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Message of the Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development for World Fisheries Day (21 November 2020)

The following is the message of the prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, His Eminence Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson, on the occasion of the World Fisheries Day, to be held tomorrow, 21 November 2020:

Message of Cardinal Peter K.A. Turkson

World Fisheries Day is celebrated annually to highlight the importance of this marine based labour sector, which provides a source of employment to an estimated 59.5 million people. Strikingly one out of two workers is a woman. Asia has the highest number of workers, in this sector, and contributes some 85 percent of the world total labor force; and with 3.1 million vessels, it accounts for 68 per cent of the global total fishing fleet.

This year's celebration falls at an exceptional time, when the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have spread swiftly around the world, with dramatic consequences for the economies of many countries and a severe impact upon more vulnerable sectors such as fisheries.

Fishing industry and COVID-19

COVID-19's impact on the industry is essentially in the area of governments' strategic responses to the pandemic, such as, social distancing, and the closure of fishing markets, reduced patronage of hotels and restaurants. This has created challenges for the sale of fresh fish and related products, principally in the collapse in the demand for fishing products and the lowering of prices offered for the catch. So, in the current situation, fishing, fish-processing, consumption and trade have steadily decreased.

Challenges in the fishing industry

Beside the effects of the pandemic on the fishing industry, there are chronic problems which bedevil the industry and before which the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pale out.

These chronic problems, which constitute “fisheries crime”, are the problems of Overfishing and Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) fishing which continue around the world under different flags and by groups who dispose of powerful fleets and are better resourced. These disregard international and national laws and regulations. This state of affairs victimizes authentic fishers and fishing communities with unfair competition and depletes fish-stocks at a rate that does not allow the fishes to recover. It is a practice that is not sustainable and that leads to decreased fish population and to reduced future production. The damage done by IUU and Overfishing extends beyond the coastal population, because billions of people rely on fish for protein, and fishing is the principal livelihood for millions of people around the world.

Fisher's conditions and Covid-19

Working conditions and the safety of the fishers at sea have been affected by the closure of fishing ports due to the pandemic and the impossibility of making crew changes. Additionally, the lack of Personal Protective Equipment has increased the risk of transmitting the virus because fishers work in restricted and enclosed spaces.

As a direct consequence, several crew members have been infected in a number of fishing vessels, and unable to receive immediate medical assistance, they perished and were quickly buried at sea by their worried companions. Often the families know nothing about the fate of their loved one.

Other migrant fishers are deprived of the opportunity to work. Without any income to support their families and to repay their debts, they run the risk of becoming victims of human trafficking or forced labour. They may also be stranded in foreign countries and be forced to live in refugees/migrants camps, cramped together with poor sanitation.

Furthermore, the vast majority of fishers around the world have been, for different reasons, excluded from the basic “social protection” provided by some national governments and have been forced to rely upon the generosity of charitable organizations or the assistance of the local community for survival.

The problems of forced labour and human trafficking have always bedeviled the fisheries sector and remain particularly serious. These are aggravated by extreme poverty conditions in certain countries, which are induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, and which spark waves of distressed people who have lost jobs as fishers and who come from rural areas. Such displaced populations are prone to being cheated and compelled by brokers and recruitment agencies to work on board vessels under the threat of force or by means of debt bondage.

The word of the Church

In this time of pandemic, I would like to appeal for a greater solidarity with the most marginalized people, as it is explained in Fratelli Tutti by Pope Francis: “Solidarity finds concrete expression in service, which can take a variety of forms in an effort to care for others. And service in great part means “caring for vulnerability, for the vulnerable members of our families, our society, our people”(#115).

The path to full protection of human and labour rights of all categories of fishers remains a long and winding road. Yet again, we raise our voice to call for a renewed effort from international organizations and governments, to strengthen their commitment to implement legislations to improve the living and working conditions of fishers and their families and to toughen their fight against forced labour and human trafficking.

The time for talking is over. It is time to act! “When the dignity of the human person is respected, and his or her rights recognized and guaranteed, creativity and interdependence thrive, and the creativity of the human personality is released through actions that further the common good” (Pope Francis, Address to the Civil

Authorities, Tirana, Albania (21 September 2014).

Finally, on this World Fisheries Day, my thoughts are with all the fishers around the world who are experiencing hardships and difficulties. In particular, I would like to mention the eighteen fishers of different nationalities from Mazara del Vallo - Sicilia, who have been held incommunicado in Libya since September 2.

Their families continue to wait anxiously for information about their whereabouts and the opportunity to talk with their loved ones. Most of all they long to be reunited with them.

For this simple, humanitarian reason, I appeal to the appropriate national governments and authorities to resolve this acute situation, and find a positive solution through open and sincere dialogue.

Cardinal Peter K.A. Turkson

Prefect
