

Mafia and Triad gangsters are the scourge of high seas

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FULL TEXT

UK ministers are in a Brexit deadlock over the question of fisheries and EU access to British waters. But concerns over the future of our fishing industry pale when compared to the ravaging of global fish stocks by illegal fishing. With 34.2% of global stocks fully over-exploited, illegal fishing –worth an estimated \$23.5 billion –is now a vast criminal enterprise, accounting for up to 26 million tonnes of fish every year. It is often controlled by Mafia and Triad gangsters. Referred to officially as illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, the criminal gangs involved plunder fish on such a scale that some coastal stocks are now nearing collapse, threatening the survival of poor, rural communities, often in developing nations.

Dilapidated and dangerous industrial trawlers, using banned fishing gear, remain at sea for months or sometimes years, to avoid surveillance or inspection. They re-fuel at sea, are re-supplied at sea and change over their crews at sea. They Hoover up everything in their path, killing tens of thousands of seabirds, turtles, sharks and other protected species and dumping millions of tonnes of by-catch. Their sole motivation is to maximise profits and minimise costs and to achieve this they break all the rules, enslave their crews and sail under so-called 'flags of convenience' to avoid detection.

Flags of convenience are issued by countries like Honduras, Panama and Cambodia. There are even three landlocked countries, Bolivia, Moldova and Mongolia with registers for flags of convenience. The authorities in these countries pocket a handsome profit issuing licences to the pirate trawlers from China, Korea, Russia and elsewhere, allowing them to fly their flags while they steal fish.

Unscrupulous owners of these pirate vessels recruit crew by offering wages of \$200 per month, low by our standards but irresistible to desperately poor people from coastal states in West Africa like Sierra Leone and Mauritania. They find themselves trapped onboard a rusting hulk, their identification cards confiscated by the skipper and told that their food and accommodation costs \$250 per month...ie more than their wages. They are effectively enslaved.

The abuse of these slave workers is horrific. The Environmental Justice Foundation filmed one trawler off West Africa where the owners had erected a wooden hut hanging over the stern-end of the ramshackle ship. This was home to more than 200 crew, who were forced to sleep, cook, eat and wash in foul conditions that would be frowned upon in the worst favelas of Rio de Janeiro. The majority of workers are untrained and yet are forced to work with dangerous and poorly maintained equipment in one of the world's most deadly professions. Workers who complain or try to escape are brutally beaten.

There are even allegations of murder, with bodies flung into the sea from Chinese vessels, where even some official observers on board have been killed. Many hundreds are seriously injured every year, but they have no protection. These boats are beyond the law.

The EU has a crucial role to play in tackling this global scandal. The European Commission has adopted an updated list of vessels that cannot land or sell their fish in the EU as they have been identified as taking part in IUU fishing. The list comprises vessels included in the IUU lists adopted by regional fisheries management organisations around the world.

We also know that the big pirate trawlers operating off the coast of West Africa routinely transfer their catches at

sea to refrigerator vessels and then land the catch out of sight in ports of convenience around the world. This fish is then mixed or processed to cover its tracks and sold into the European market, despite the fact that it has been caught and stored under these desperately unhygienic and insanitary conditions. These pirate owners must be exposed, closed down and prosecuted.

The European Commission needs to get tough. They need to smash down on those member states who tolerate this economic and environmental scandal. They need to urge the United Nations to enforce a worldwide International Maritime Organisation (IMO) number as a unique identifier for all industrial fishing vessels and commit funding, as has been done by Spain, towards the creation of a Global Record of fishing vessels in a bid to help tackle IUU fishing. This would be relatively easy to do and such enforced transparency would enable fishing authorities around the world to root out the pirates.

Europe is only 40% self-sufficient in fish for human consumption. We import 60% of all the fish we eat. A portion of this imported fish may come from pirate sources. EU consumers are therefore financing this vast criminal project with all its attendant human rights abuse, environmental damage and impoverishment of poor coastal communities.

Meanwhile our own fishermen are forced to obey an over-abundance of regulations, with 'total allowable catches', quotas, a limit to the days they can go to sea, engine size restrictions, enforced tie-ups, decommissioning schemes, scrapping, designated ports, technical measures, mesh sizes and a host of red tape. The life of a fisherman is fraught, but our fishermen obey the rules. It is sickening for them to see imports of illegally caught fish from outside the EU undercutting their markets.

More than 3 billion people in the world rely on fish for critical animal protein, underscoring the importance of sustainable fisheries in supporting global food security.

As world populations continue to soar, the demand for seafood increases and an increasing segment of fish stocks are being harvested beyond their ability to sustainably reproduce. "Fishing down the food chain" is the result. While aquaculture is one supplementary way of meeting high consumer demand, the gap between supply and demand continues to widen. IUU fishing is recognised as a major threat to the long-term sustainability of the world's oceans.

IUU fishing is often connected to transnational crime, including human rights abuse, tax evasion, piracy, drugs, and arms and human trafficking. So as UK ministers wrangle over new rules for post-Brexit fishermen in UK waters, they should add their weight to demanding international laws that control IUU fishing and the massive damage it causes.

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