



# Lives Matter in Raft Fishery

The Raft fishery, notoriously known as risky and abusive business, has recently been captured by international media due to its human rights violations. Despite presented horrific tales in the news, abusive and brutal cases are growing at sea. Raft fishery involves large wooden rafts anchored near the fishing ground and is operated roughly fifty miles away from shore. There are around 10,000 rafts operate near Pyapon town of Ayeyarwady Region and around 5,000 rafts near Yay town of Mon State, of which less than one third registered with Department of Fishery (DoF).

According to the Department of Fishery, the Raft fishing takes place in fishing areas designated as C4, C5, C9, and C10 in the Ayeyarwady Region, and under D11, D12, D17 and D18 in Mon (Figure 1). Since the fishing is undertaken out of the boundaries of inland fisheries, only Marine Fishery laws are applicable to Raft.

The business requires one carrier boat for each eight bamboo rafts, the fishing season starts in August through April among which September, December and April are the peak seasons for the fishery.

Raft fishery is risky both for the owners and the workers but it has a powerful attraction because of its high-risk-high-reward orientation. Each raft

costs around 10 Million Myanmar Kyat (about 7,600 USD, including labor costs and around 3 Million Kyat (230 USD) for carrier boat.

Although the initial investment seems quite high, the owners can expect high reward from the bet as much as 400~450 lakh MMK (34,100 USD) per raft.



Figure 1 Fishing Ground of Myanmar (DoF)

On rafts, there are three types of crews: boat supervisor and boat crew working for carrier boat; head supervisor, raft supervisor and Raft crew working for rafts and land supervisor, assistant land supervisor, land laborer, clerk, net repairer and the mechanic working on land site. Depending on their skills, they can expect different monthly salary rates ranging from 80,000 Kyat (60 USD) for raft crew, 150,000 Kyat (120 USD) for Raft Supervisor to 700, 0000 Kyat (550 USD) for head of supervisor.

Growing labor demand and increasing labor shortages have made raft owner increasingly reliant on informal labor recruitment agents. The agent targets very poor rural people, mostly uneducated men, who may or may not have experience in the fishery, but who are in desperate needs for jobs. The agents take some fees as a service charge from the owners. The biggest incentive for the fish workers to work on the rafts is big sum in advance, which can be the amount nearly up to ten times of their basic salary.

The job of the raft crews involves setting and hauling the nets and preserving the catches. Each haul takes around 4 hours, allowing nets to be hauled up to four times a day. To carry out the net operations, two teams (each has two crews) work in rotation, the working hours for each team can last up to minimum 12 hours per day. All the crew members working on the raft stay for a full season (around 7 to 8 months). Rice, kitchen supplies and drinking water are provided by raft owners whereas other necessities can be ordered through carrier boat and those expenses are deducted from salary.

Shrimp is the main catch and are marketed in dried form. Other fish species such as anchovies, Bombay duck, pomfret, and ribbon fish are also targeted. Some of the valued species are iced while the rest are processed and dried on the rafts. The raft crew and supervisors receive a bonus based on the amount of fish catch.

## Issues in Raft Fisheries

There are only few crews registered under DoF while many others have neither National Registration Card (NRC) nor labor card. The long working hours (minimum 12 hours a day), hard physical work and limited resting time make the crew tiresome and unproductive while brutal treatment of supervisor makes both physical and mental conditions of the workers worst, leading to injuries and even deaths.

The frequent cyclones are common natural disaster, claims many crews lives every year as no life savings equipment (e.g.: life jacket) provided by the owners to avoid crew fleeing from the raft. From food safety and hygiene perspectives, only limited basic food supplies such as rice, salt, oil and limited amount of drinking water are provided. The poor and unsafe sanitation on the raft is also a risk that easily contracts infectious diseases leading to severe illness or death as they are contact with the rotten fish. Lack of medical care leads minor diseases to severe stage due to unhygienic condition. The owner pay compensation to their families of those who died on the rafts but there is no exact agreed compensation amount.

In Daw Nyein and Dae Da Lu village tracts, referring specifically to NAG's field data in Ayeyarwady (Sep 2018-May 2019), totally 245 workers were reported as 79 dead, 43 missing, 121 fled, 1 suicide, and 1 murder cases in raft fishery. There is no clear history of raft crews



accidents, about half of reported 245 cases don't have a documented profile and it made those cases difficult to be identified as well as the owner to take responsibilities and compensation.

To enable to address this problem, a Raft Fishery (Raft) Association was established comprising of raft owners, in 2016 in Pyapon Township, Ayeyarwaddy region and Yae Township in Mon State. But the association has no representatives from the crews, making it difficult for them to get due representation.

### Covid-19 Impact on Raft Fishery

During the pandemic, the government's-imposed restrictions including travel restriction and lockdown against Covid-19 have severely affected daily lives of working communities, including raft fishers and owners. It had not been possible for workers to travel and work on rafts from other parts of Myanmar, such as Dry Zone. The labors lost job opportunities while owners face crew shortages to run raft operation. In October 2020, due to COVID restrictions, NAG collaborated DoF in Pyapon township jetties of Ayeyarwaddy region to lead implementation of awareness raising activities of forced labor as forms of IECs informing existing human trafficking laws and labor exploitation risk reduction.

Compared to previous years, the raft owners could take much smaller advance loans from informal Yangon finance access places to undertake operations efficiently from whole sale owner based in Yangon. In addition, demand for dried shrimp and fish from Yangon wholesale was reduced to one third due to Covid related restrictions.

### Recommendations

In order to tackle the issues of raft fishery, many CSOs and INGOs have focused attention on the improvement of labor conditions in off-shore raft fisheries. The further steps, however, to be taken are:

- Creating enabling labor conditions including fair and transparent labor recruitment and contracting; improving labor registration; provision of decent working hours, safety training and equipment, hygiene facilities and health care services.
- Enabling crew to be equipped with social security, safety net and benefits including insurance coverage and compensation packages
- Organizing and strengthening Raft Labor Association and Raft Owner Association and establishing coordination mechanism in place to resolve issues.
- Continuing raising awareness of raft fishery via information and education campaigns
- Establishing knowledge sharing platforms, and organizing media events to update regular progress and issues
- Advocating Union Legislation Committee to take raft fishery issues in drafting Myanmar Marine Fishery Law.

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