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Human rights and labor advocates push for the ratification of ILO C188 to protect Filipino fishers

Quezon City, Philippines – Human rights, labor advocates, government officials, civil society organizations, fisher representatives, and Filipino migrant fishers came together for a significant forum, **“Anchoring Rights: A Forum on ILO Convention No. 188 and Fishers’ Issues and Concerns”** at the APSU-ALU Building in Quezon City on 21 November 2024. The event highlighted the urgent need to ratify the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) Work in Fishing Convention No. 188, to safeguard the rights of fishers and improve labor conditions in the global fishing industry.

The forum opened with the **screening of a compelling documentary** produced by the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF). The film revealed exploitative working conditions, including forced labor, unsafe working conditions, and insufficient wages, but also underscored the severe impact of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing on the livelihoods of fishers and the sustainability of the world’s oceans.



Kuya Nante, a migrant fisher from Quezon province, expressed his aspiration for a decent working conditions for Filipino fishers.

“Based on our in-depth research and recent interviews with 135 crew members, all reported experiencing various indicators of forced labor and human trafficking. But they represent just the tip of the iceberg,” said Angel Ysik, EJF Campaigner.

Call to action: “No Fishers, No Fish”

Advocates stressed that protecting fishers is a moral obligation and a vital step in ensuring food security and sustainable fisheries. **“We are challenged to make the issue of fishers a public issue, not just a concern of the organizers of this forum. Many eat and love fish but may not be aware of the realities of this ‘forgotten category,’** said Fr. Paulo Prigol, Stella Maris-Manila Director.

The forum featured a dynamic panel discussion led by experts from the Associated Philippine Seafarers Union (APSU), the Associated Labor Union (ALU), Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP), Stella Maris Manila, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Department of Migrant Workers (DMW), and Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA).



(From left to right) Dr. Asis of Scalabrini, Mr. Villena of ALU/TUCP, Mr. Corral of ALU/APSU, and Fr. Prigol of Stella Maris-Manila during the Panel Discussion on the Role of ILO C188 in Safeguarding Fishers’ Rights and Combating Forced Labor in Distant Water Fisheries.

“Ang domestic fishers ang isa sa pinakamahirap na sector sa Pilipinas. Mahirap kumita sa larangan na ‘yan. ‘Yung seasonality ng work, ‘yung irregularity ng pay, and ‘yung lack of social protection. They work in fishing vessels, eating poor food, and forced to drink unsafe water. Walang sufficient social security, very vulnerable to poverty,” (The domestic fishers are one of the poorest sector in the Philippines. It is very hard to gain profit in that industry. The seasonality of work, the irregularity of pay, and the lack of social protection. They work in fishing vessels, eating poor food, and forced to drink unsafe water. There is no sufficient social security, [they are] very vulnerable to poverty) said Mark Villena of ALU and TUCP.

Government leaders voice support

In his keynote address, the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP) President and House Deputy Speaker Raymond Democrito C. Mendoza (TUCP Party-list) reiterated his commitment to pushing for the ratification of the ILO C188. Deputy Speaker Mendoza, who previously authored House Resolution No. 168, calling for the Philippine Government's immediate ratification of ILO Convention No. 188, otherwise known as "Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (No. 188), which the House of Representatives already adopted in the 18th Congress, filed House Resolution 2059 this year, urging President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr. to ratify the convention, and for the Senate to concur.

"The TUCP stands for every fisher's right to occupational safety, medical care, written work agreements, rest, and social protection. Ratifying ILO Convention No. 188 sends a strong message to the world: the Philippines stands for the safety and dignity of its workers," Deputy Speaker Mendoza declared.

DMW Secretary Hans Leo J. Cacdac also voiced the agency's support. He outlined ongoing initiatives to protect migrant fishers, such partnership with the Maritime Industry Authority (MARINA) to improve skill training, legal and financial assistance from the AKSYON Fund, plan to craft a Standard Employment Contract (SEC) designed to address the unique needs and concerns of fishers, and organization of Licensed Manning Agencies for Fishers to ensure ethical recruitment practices.



Assistant Chief Ayn E. Natuel of the Philippine National Police - Women and Children Protection Center (PNP-WCPC) signed the call to ratify the ILO C188. The event collected more than 100 signatures from all the participants present.

"The DMW remains steadfast in supporting the ratification of ILO C188 and ensuring the welfare of our fishers. Migrant fishers contribute significantly to the country's fishing industry and play an indispensable role in the global market. We invite everyone, including partners in government, to reaffirm their commitment to protecting the welfare of our migrant fishers." said Secretary Cacdac.

The event culminated in a **symbolic signing ceremony**, where the guest speakers and participants pledged to work collaboratively to ratify ILO C188 and protect fishers' rights. Stakeholders also emphasized the need for stronger legal frameworks to combat labor abuses linked to IUU fishing and to ensure sustainable fishing practices.



(From Top to Bottom) TUCP President and House Deputy Speaker Raymond Democrito C. Mendoza; Sec. Hans Leo J. Cacdac of DMW; Dir. Jocelyn Ortega of OWWA, Dir. Augusto B. San Diego III of Sea-based Accreditation Bureau (SAB) - DMW, Sir Luis M. Corral of ALU/APSU, and Fr. Paulo Prigol of Stella Maris Manila.

Looking ahead

The forum emphasized the need for ongoing collaboration and concrete steps forward. First, the **Philippine Government** is urged to strengthen legal frameworks, ratify ILO C188, and enforce labor protections, particularly in the context of IUU fishing; The **civil society** is called upon to amplify the voices of fishers, raise awareness about IUU fishing, and provide vital support to affected communities, while the **international community** is encouraged to foster regional cooperation and ensure ethical labor practices in global fisheries. Lastly, the **seafood industry** must prioritize transparency, adopt traceability systems, and ensure fair labor practices across their supply chains to prevent exploitation.

About the ILO C188

Adopted in 2007, the **Work in Fishing Convention** (ILO C188) sets international labor standards to protect fishers' rights, including fair recruitment practices, health and safety measures, and social security. Despite its significance, many countries, including the Philippines, have yet to ratify the convention.

Ratifications by country



For more information about the organizers, please scan the QR code.

