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## [Violence against local fisherfolk in India](#)

Chilika Lake is one of the largest inland brackish water bodies in Asia, of immense ecological importance for its unique and varied biodiversity. Though Chilika was declared by the Ramsar Convention to be a wetland of international importance, the shrimp aquaculture industry at that time threatened to establish itself there via the mafia-like activities of the powerful industrial group Tata House which planned several industrial shrimp farms on the shores of Lake Chilika. By means of a court injunction, Tata House was stopped, and its pond construction halted mid-course, what was considered an important victory. Nevertheless later smaller scale shrimp farms operated by less noteworthy investors were quietly and illegally constructed. Over the years, the operation of these smaller shrimp farms has caused many problems for the local residents and environmental degradation at Chilika. Nowadays the situation has reached a boiling point.

A terrible tragedy has taken place at Chilika Lake. According to a report by the National Fishworkers Forum (India) and the World Forum of Fish-harvesters and Fishworkers, four protestors -including one woman- have been killed and thirteen other people injured by rampaging police in Orissa State. The victims were part of a group of residents of fishing villages who oppose continued shrimp farming in the Chilika Lake region.

The Supreme Court of India issued a historical judgement against aquaculture in Chilika, establishing that there should be no shrimp farms within 1000 meters of the lake. The fishworker organisation then gave a 24 hour ultimatum to demolish all prawn infrastructures, which lapsed on May 29th. After the deadline they themselves destroyed about 11 illegal prawn farms. Then the police reacted violently and raided the village beating villagers mercilessly, throwing tear gas shells and shooting them. Banchhanidhi Behera died on the spot, and Digambar Behrera and Prema Behra on the way to hospital. Another victim died later at hospital.

The National Fishworkers Forum and the World Forum Of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers condemned the incident, strongly protested against the police action, demanded the withdrawal of the Aquaculture Authority Bill and asked the guilty to be punished immediately. NFF also expressed deep anguish over the way the authority is handling the situation, and its serious concern about the personal safety of the leaders and the people of the movement. The organization also demands compensation for the family of the deceased and for the injured, as well as proper medical care for the injured. A strike call was made for June 5th .

That day the railway and road connection with the Eastern coast of the country came into a standstill. Fishworkers blockaded the railroad in many stations, as a result of which trains were stranded in different stations. From the morning, fishworkers started sitting on the railway lines of Rambha, Khallikote, Bhusandapur and other stations. In Bhubaneswar station 600 women carrying their children stopped the Chennai-Howrah Koromandal Express. Eight trains were cancelled. Apart from the communication system, in the rest of the state the impact of the strike was also important. In the capital Bhubaneswar it was totally successful and shops were closed. Thousands of fishworkers from Chilika and adjacent areas have made a human wall in the city and vehicles were totally stopped. Attendance in offices was very poor. Police arrested 2000 people including fishworkers and workers

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of different political groups.

Indian environmental and social NGOs have called for an international response in protest to the Prime Minister of India, and to the State authorities in Orissa where the violence occurred.

Please, send faxes and/or letters of protest to the Prime Minister and Orissa Chief Minister at the following addresses:

Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee,  
Prime Minister of India,  
52, South Block

Chief Minister of Orissa,  
Bhubaneswar,  
Orissa, India.

#### SAMPLE LETTER

"Honourable Prime Minister Vajpayee,

With this letter, I wish to express to your government condemnation and absolute repulsion over the lamentable events that have occurred in Orissa, India that resulted in the killing of four fisher people, and the wounding of 13 others, as a result of police actions taken against their protests over the construction of shrimp aquaculture facilities in Chilika Lake.

Chilika lake has been occupied by the shrimp industry, with the support of the local politicians and bureaucrats, even though the Supreme Court of India has ruled in an historical decision that shrimp farms were to be prohibited within 1,000 meters of the lake.

In response to the illegal establishment of these shrimp farms, the fisherfolk of Chilika, supported by the National Forum of Fisherworkers, were exercising their right to protest against these actions, and denounce them to the authorities.

The Indian Government must initiate actions against the people responsible for the deaths of these citizens of Chilika, and to prosecute those who have installed or continue to operate shrimp farms, in violation of the order of the Supreme Court of India.

Yours sincerely,"

Sources: Maurizio Ferrari, 17/6/99; Late Friday News nr. 37, 18/6/99