

Malaysian fishermen want govt to crack down on Vietnamese encroachers

Fishers say their squid stock is diminishing because of foreigners entering territorial waters.

By Ahmad Mustakim Zulkifli and Syahrin Abdul Aziz for BenarNews
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Mazlan Awang, a fishmonger, dumps squid into a plastic bag to sell to a customer at a market in Pasar Payang, Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia, April 13, 2024. (Syahrin Abdul Aziz/BenarNews)

Syed Mohd Nawawi and fellow Malaysian fishermen are fed up.

They say they want local authorities to do more to crack down on foreign fishing boats – particularly from [Vietnam](#) – that have been encroaching into Malaysia's territorial waters for years to trawl for squid.

Malaysia has laws with stiff penalties to guard against illegal fishing. It also signed an MoU with Vietnam three years ago to deal with this issue.

But that hasn't deterred foreign fishermen from trawling in Malaysian waters without permits or paying off local skippers to lend them their fishing licenses, Malaysian fishermen allege.

The local squid stock is becoming depleted because the Vietnamese boats use big nets that can damage the sea floor, Syed said.

“Fishermen on the east coast of Malaysia really don’t want this,” he told BenarNews.

Syed is based in Kuala Terengganu, a port on the eastern shores of Peninsular Malaysia.

"They use 'pukat gading' [large fishing nets] ... equipment that can damage the ecosystem. [W]hatever is under the sea is depleted because they use rollers," he said of the Vietnamese boats, adding that when the nets come upon reefs "they'll kill all the coral and everything."

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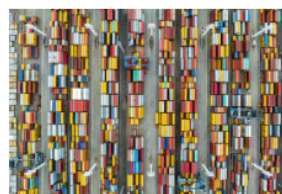
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As a result of [illegal fishing](#) by foreigners, Malaysia lost US\$172 million (823 million ringgit) in fisheries through 428 incursions by non-Malaysian boats between 2020 and 2023, according to Mohamad Sabu, Malaysia's minister of Agriculture and Food Security.

Of the 19 foreign boats intercepted and seized by Malaysian authorities during that period, 18 were from Vietnam, officials said.

Persistent problem

Vietnamese fishing boats have been encroaching in Malaysian waters in the South China Sea for almost two decades, residents, officials and experts say. But despite a memorandum of understanding signed between the two countries' maritime agencies in 2021, the problem persists.

"In 2022, there was an oil spill in the Gulf of Thailand and this led to a decline in fish species in nearby areas. Indirectly, this has caused many foreign fishermen from Vietnam and Thailand to trawl in Malaysian waters," said one expert, Syuhaida Ismail.

"Most Vietnamese fishing vessels would fish in their own area, but then came to Malaysian waters after their sonar technology detected more catches in Malaysia. The catches are known to be more rewarding compared to catches in Vietnam," Syuhaida, research director at the Maritime Institute of Malaysia, told BenarNews.



A catch of squid is displayed at the market in Pasar Payang, Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia, April 13, 2024. [Syahrin Abdul Aziz/BenarNews]

Under Malaysia's fisheries law, foreign fishing boats and foreign nationals are subject to a fine not exceeding 6 million ringgit (\$1.25 million) each in the case of the owner or master, and 600,000 ringgit (US\$125,000) in the case of every member of the crew, if found guilty of fishing illegally in Malaysian waters.

malaysian waters.

During intercepts at sea by Malaysia's coast guard, some tense and violent standoffs with Vietnamese fishermen have occurred.

In 2020, a Vietnamese sailor was shot dead by members of the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency, after crews of Vietnam-flagged vessels rammed and attacked an MMEA boat with Molotov cocktails and hard objects during a patrol 81 nautical miles (150 km) off [Tok Bali](#) in Kelantan state, coast guard officials said at the time.

And last July, one MMEA member was attacked and seriously injured to the head while inspecting a Vietnamese fishing boat off the coast of Kuala Terengganu.

According to one Vietnamese fisherman, desperation drove him to fish in Malaysian waters. For safety reasons, he requested that he remain anonymous.

"There are difficulties. For example, at that time, in Vietnam, our fishing grounds did not have enough squid. But in their waters, they have more. So we have to enter their waters," the fisherman said during an interview with RFA Vietnamese at Radio Free Asia.

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