Much ado about shrimp as exporters seek govt help to quell ‘foreign lobby’

By Rajeev Jayaswal, Rezaul H Laskar , New Delhi

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States, particularly Andhra Pradesh have been also alerted, a third person said. Andhra Pradesh is biggest supplier of shrimp to the US

India’s shrimp exporters on Thursday sought the government’s help in launching a global campaign against the international lobby that is attempting to malign Indian products with an intent to kill ₹43,000 crore of shrimp exports, largely to the US market where India has a 40% marketshare.

The US is India’s biggest buyer, about $2.4 billion worth of shrimp. More Indian shrimp reach the US after processing in a third country. (Shutterstock)

Some US lawmakers have written to President Biden to act against Indian shrimp imports after a foreign employee of Kerala-based Choice Canning group alleged that the company was exporting shrimp contaminated with antibiotics and engaging in forced labour practices. Activists and a section of the US media also joined the clamour.

On the demand of the Indian exporters, the commerce ministry on Thursday convened a meeting of the stakeholders. In the meeting the exporters expressed willingness to open their facilities for inspection by any independent international agency, at least three people present in the meeting said requesting anonymity.

“All 548 Indian shrimp exporters are absolutely confident about meeting the stringent norms prescribed by the US Food and Drugs Administration (FDA) at their processing facilities, and hence sought the government’s help to invite national and international agencies to conduct audits to end the falsehood spread by competitors,” one of them said. India’s competitors in the trade are Ecuador, China and Vietnam.

The exporters also asked government officials to invite internationally-recognised organisations to evaluate prevailing labour conditions in these shrimp processing units, he said. The meeting was attended by senior officials from ministries of commerce and external affairs, regulatory bodies such as the Marine Products Export Development Authority (MPEDA) and exporters.

“A thorough audit could be done to reassure buyers, but there is no trigger to raise this matter at the G2G [government-to-government] level,” a second person, a senior government official, said. While all regulatory bodies have been conducting regular audits, they have been asked to remain extra vigil, he said referring to MPEDA, Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) and Export Inspection Council (EIC). India banned usage of antibiotics in aquaculture in 2002.

States, particularly Andhra Pradesh have been also alerted, a third person said. Andhra Pradesh is biggest supplier of shrimp to the US. India aims to achieve seafood exports worth ₹1 lakh crore in the next two years moving up in the value chain, he said. “Instead of exporting in bulk, one kg shrimp, properly packed and branded, fetch up to $15 in the US market," he added.

In 2022-23, India registered record seafood exports worth ₹63,969.14 crore ($8.09 billion) with much of this coming from frozen shrimp (₹43,135.58 crore or $5.5 billion). The US is India's biggest buyer, about $2.4 billion worth of shrimp. More Indian shrimp reach the US after processing in a third country. India is now focusing on value addition locally before exporting to the US, a prospect that has alarmed competitors, the third person added. "A similar campaign launched against Thai seafood disrupted supply of Thai shrimp about a decade ago," he added.

Speaking about the whistleblower Joshua Farinella, a US citizen, the first person said the company in question, Choice Canning refuted the charge of malpractices at its facility where Farinella was employed. In an email reply, Choice Group director Thomas Jose said: "This is now a legal matter that is being directly handled by the Government of India to safeguard the interests of India. As per the whistleblower's public record, he has an extensive criminal background on where he has been convicted and pled guilty on several occasions which includes theft by deception, identity theft, assault, bank fraud, check fraud amongst others." Choice Canning is a supplier to retail giants such as Walmart and Aldi.

Referring to Farinella's complaint, US Congress members Garret Graves and Mary Sattler Peltola on March 22 wrote to Biden that the "damning evidence from someone in the industry has revealed strong concerns of severe food safety issues and labour violations at an Indian shrimp processing plant". "These foreign producers are deliberately using government subsidies and shortcuts – like packing the supply with banned antibiotics or using feed caught through illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing practices – to undercut domestic shrimp suppliers and flood the American market with cheap and unsafe shrimp," they jointly wrote to the President asking him to take "swift action to protect American consumers".

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Rezaul H Laskar is the Foreign Affairs Editor at Hindustan Times. His interests include movies and music.

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By HT News Desk

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Former Uttarakhand chief minister and senior Congress leader Harish Rawat on Friday gave a word advice to the grand old party to "rediscover the hunger for power" ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. He also voiced concern over BJP workers filling the "vacuum" left by the Congress party at all stages.

Former Uttarakhand chief minister Harish Rawat

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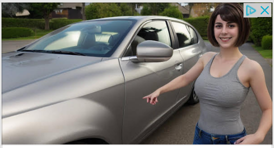

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"We have to rediscover and develop that hunger for power within ourselves. Otherwise, we will continue to cede more ground to the BJP after every election...d. We cannot aspire to hold our own in villages and localities unless we beat the BJP at every level. The need of the hour for the Congress is to revive and reinvent itself so that the party could have its leaders elected at every level," Rawat told news agency ANI.

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The Congress leader added, "Our partners in the INDIA bloc are helping us renew our hunger for success and power…At this stage, every Congressman should come out in full strength, overcoming the hurdles that the ruling party in the state and Centre has created for us. We will struggle to achieve electoral success unless we go into elections with a strong resolve and a do-or-die approach.”

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