

# 600 held in fish ban row

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About 600 Hongkong fishermen aboard 60 junks are today in detention in ports and fishing communes in Hainan Island because of a sudden and unannounced fishing ban imposed by the Chinese authorities.

And in the past four weeks about 500 other junks of the Hongkong inshore fishing fleet, most of them shrimp trawlers, have been grabbed at sea and fined on the spot for breaking new regulations which have not yet come into force.

The ban on fishing in a 20-nautical mile-wide belt of rich fishing grounds along the coast of Guangxi and Guangdong has already sent fish prices in Hongkong rocketing, according to fishery industry spokesmen.

Aberdeen distributor, Mr Ho Tim-wah, says the price of shrimps has doubled since the beginning of the month because 90 per cent of Aberdeen's shrimp trawlers had been idle for at least a month.

And fresh fish prices are also expected to soar if the situation remains unchanged, he said.

Chinese authorities said the new regulations will come

into force on January 1.

The Chinese will prohibit fishing in a 20-nautical mile-wide belt of inshore waters along the coast of South China, unless the boat owners obtain a special permit.

The Chinese authorities said that they are being introduced for ecological reasons, to protect marine life and sea-shore environment.

But angry Hongkong fishermen say the reasons are to protect the relatively inefficient Chinese fishing fleet and to curb the activities of smugglers who are sneaking luxury goods into China.

A six-member delegation of Hongkong fishermen were promised by the Guangdong Fisheries Authority that the cases of those under arrest would be examined, but the boats and fishermen would be held in China, reliable sources said.

About half the inshore fleet of 2,000 junks was yesterday idle in Aberdeen.

Hundreds of fishermen say they will march on the New China News Agency to protest about the new policy and the manner in which it has been enforced without warning.

Fishermen interviewed yesterday at Aberdeen and Shauiwan, many with dual-registration ships, said the sudden arrests began at the beginning of this month.

Some claimed to have been arrested up to 40 nautical miles off the Chinese coast.

They said fines imposed ranged from 200 renmin-

bi (about \$600) to 500 renminbi (about \$1,500) for first offenders.

Those caught a second time paid double the fine and if they were caught again, the fines were doubled again.

The chairman of the Hongkong and Kowloon Fishermen's Welfare Association, Mr Keung Yin-man, said yesterday the ban was unfair in the first place, and even more unfair in the way in which the Chinese authorities had administered it without warning.

"There are no live shrimps today in Aberdeen," Mr Keung said.

"Hongkong housewives are soon going to find it hard to buy their favourite seafood delicacies."

Yesterday, a survey of fish markets showed the prices were already soaring.

Among the fishermen who had been arrested by the Chinese authorities, Mr Lee Tim-sing and Mr Ng Fook-yau both of Aberdeen, might be among the lucky ones who paid only a small fine for their "offence."

Mr Lee, father of nine children, was caught by the Chinese authorities on December 13 and was fined \$746 on the spot about 60 km south of Cheung Chau.

The officials were quite nice to an inmate on board but they searched the junk for fishing products because the fine would be based on the size of the catch found on the junk.

"For every 50 kilos of shrimp found, the junk owner would be fined \$60, and for fish, it would be \$16 fine for every 50 kilos.

"Chinese officials also fined junk owners based on the horsepower of their engines."

Mr Ng was also arrested on the same date and at almost the same spot as Mr Lee.

He was fined \$420 for violating the new regulations.

"The fine is to pay for the catch which could be retained by the fishermen.

"The arrests and fines are recorded by the Chinese authorities because if one is arrested three times, the junk and property on board will be confiscated and the crew detained until about \$15,000 per head is paid for their freedom to the Chinese," he said.

Both fisherman blamed the Hongkong Government for not protecting the welfare of local fishermen by not negotiating a fair fishing treaty with the Chinese.

According to a spokesman for the Aberdeen fishing industry, Mr Fok Ngau,

shrimp trawler fishermen can net as much as \$6,000 per two-day trip in the on-season. But now their profit is down to a few hundred dollars as the total catch is decreasing and the cost of fuel is soaring.

Mr Fok said fishermen were selling their junks because they were not going to risk being arrested again.

Mr Fok said inshore fishermen, who own about half the fleet at Aberdeen, were hardest hit.

The inshore fleet provides Hongkong with about 70 per cent of its saltwater fish.

A spokesman for the Agriculture and Fisheries Department said yesterday nobody was available to provide any information because it was a holiday.

Mr Keung said many of the fishermen had made large amounts of money recently by smuggling luxury goods into China.

Other sources said Hongkong fishermen had exchanged these luxury goods for silver coins and other valuables worth at least \$1.5 billion.

China could have used this money for its modernisation campaign, the sources said.

One of the reasons behind the ban is to put a stop to this trade.

A number of Hongkong fishermen have been shot dead in recent months during high-sea chases with Chinese naval and customs vessels.