Police Fire on Fuel-Cost Protest; One Dead

BHARATHA MALLAWARACHI, Associated Press

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka (AP) — Sri Lankan police fired on fishermen protesting a fuel price increase Wednesday, killing one person and wounding three, a witness and a doctor said.

Police spokesman Ajith Rohana said police used tear gas to disperse an "unlawful mob" but refused to comment on whether police fired guns at the protesters.

Thousands of fishermen were walking in a protest march near the fishing town of Chilaw and clashed with police, who later opened fire at them, said local journalist Jude Samantha who was at the scene in the town 70 kilometers (43 miles) north of the capital, Colombo.

Police tried to block the protesters from entering the Chilaw town and in turn protesters started hurling stones at the police, Samantha said. Police used tear gas and then opened fire.

Dr. Dinusha Jayasinghe said one dead person and three with gunshot wounds were brought to the town hospital. She said one person's condition is critical.

Protests have swept across Sri Lanka after the government increased fuel prices Saturday night. Private bus owners launched a strike Monday, crippling public transportation, and the government increased bus fares as a result.

Since Monday, fishermen from coastal villages and towns have protested, burning tires and blocking roads with their boats to demand fuel prices be reduced.

The government said prices had to be raised since world oil prices have increased. Government spokesman Anura Priyadarshana Yapa said the government has arranged fuel subsidies for bus owners, fishermen and taxi owners.

Separately on Wednesday, police also used tear gas to disperse hundreds of activists from an opposition Marxist party who were protesting the fuel prices and tried to march to the center of the capital, Colombo.

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