

9 Lankan sailors two-months afloat offshore await relief

By Leon Berenger

A group of nine Sri Lankan seamen have been left stranded on a foreign-flagged vessel for the past two months, with limited fresh water and food, over a payment dispute with the owner who is alleged to have attempted to slip out without settling the dues, maritime officials said yesterday.

The Tanzanian-flagged Sea Gull II is currently anchored Off Port Limit (OPL) off the Galle coast, until the local agent makes the necessary arrangements to settle the back wages of the crew. International Transport workers Federation's (ITF) Ranjan Perera alleged that the local agent had gone back on his word on several previous occasions, adding that, steps will be taken to arrest the ship if the matter is not settled soon.



He said the crew was recruited in Colombo and later flown to a port in Japan, where their task was to bring the vessel to Colombo for some minor repairs, before heading for Tanzania. "However, on reaching Colombo Port, the crew informed the ITF of the non-payment of their wages and other irregularities by the vessel's owner", Mr. Perera said.

Waiting to come home: The crew on board the Sea Gull II

He added that, on Friday, the agent once again breached an earlier agreement to pay the back wages, offering only 50% of the dues. "Now this was after we had met the previous day along with the Director General of Merchant Shipping (DGMS) and our lawyers, where the agent agreed to pay the full amount without any further delay."

But when the relatives of the sailors turned up at the lawyer's office in Colombo, the agent said he had no funds to pay the full amount, but would pay half in cash and the rest by cheque. This was not acceptable to the lawyer and the relatives, and so the issue is now in limbo," Mr Perera pointed out.

R.S. Stanley of NAAS shipping- the local agent for Sea Gull II, admitted that there was a delay in the payment of the wages, adding that the money will be released in a day or two.

He also said that the Tanzanian owner had already flown to Colombo and the matter should be settled at the very earliest. However, the DGMS Director Gamini Senivaratne told the Sunday Times that legal action would be taken against the agent, as he had breached the agreement on Friday, by not honouring his pledge to settle the dues in full, on the said date.

"We are treating the matter with the utmost concern", Mr. Senivaratne added. "We are low on food and fresh water, and have to depend on rain, which has not happened for the past one week" the vessel's captain U.D.A.N. Vasantha told the Sunday Times via telephone from the vessel.

"All these days we have been at the mercy of local fishermen and the ITF for food and other items, but this cannot go on for long," he added.