

A tale of two ordeals

After being hostages at the hands of Somali pirates for 8 months, hostages of circumstances for 14 months in Colombo, African fishermen are finally homeward bound

By Leon Berenger

More than two years after they set sail from Singapore, and then later for some eight months, forced to undergo an ordeal as captives of Somali pirates, a group of eight African fishermen finally left Colombo this week to their native homelands.

The Tai Yuan 227, a fishing craft left Singapore on September 16, 2009, for the Arabian Sea, where they were hijacked and taken hostage by Somali pirates on May 17, 2010. They were later held captive for some eight months before releasing the men and crew on January 23 this year.



The Kenyan crew shortly before departure

During their captivity, the pirates used the fishing craft as a clever ruse to grab some six commercial vessels which, to date, remain in their custody. After their release by the pirates, the Tai Yuan 227, along with its 27-member crew, that included a mixed bag of Chinese, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Burmese and Africans, limped into Colombo port in the early hours of February 2, 2011.

Except for the eight Africans- six from Kenya and two from Mozambique, the remaining crew left Colombo earlier for their respective countries. The Africans, however, stayed put until they were paid their back wages and compensation.



Ranjan Perera handing over tickets to the crew

Though their ordeal with the pirates ended with their release, another one was to begin at the Colombo port, after the boats' owning company based in Taiwan, reported bankruptcy. Thus placing the future of the fishermen in limbo.

The biggest problem at hand was funds to feed the group that had become restless on the vessel, which, on occasions, required police intervention and warnings.

The problem worsened after the local agent cut off food supplies to the group for lack of funds, and the responsibility had to be shouldered by the National Union

of Seafarers Sri Lanka (NUSS), together with the International Transport workers Federation (ITF).

NUSS President Palitha Athukorale and the local ITF Inspector, Ranjan Perera, together began working towards providing some relief to the eight Africans. First of all the boat, which had subsequently been siezed on a court order, was auctioned and the proceeds used to settle the fishermen and the other stakeholders such as the law firm and port fees, said Mr. Athukorale.

As the court proceedings took some time, the Africans took to vandalising the vessel during this period, selling scrap iron, etc. At other times, they would hawk imported liquor in the open, as they were entitled to duty-free purchases, he said.

When at last a buyer was found for the vessel and it was auctioned on a court order for US\$ 141,000, approximately LKR 15 million,” Mr. Perera said. And so, on Thursday this week, after they were provided with air tickets and travel expenses by the ITF head office in London, the Africans bid farewell, he added. “They were also each given US\$ 7,500 (LKR 834,750) made through individual bank drafts,” Mr. Perera said.

Speaking to the Sunday Times just prior to their departure, a spokesman for the group- Pitau Makau said he was longing to see his wife and four children, but adding that they would miss the hospitality of the Sri Lankans.

“We liked it here. People were so helpful when the chips were down for us, like when we had to eat out from the port canteen. This was difficult as the food was so spicy, but at the end of the day, we knew we had to stick it out or return home to our families empty handed,” Mr. Makau said.

“We would also like to thank the Sunday Times, which highlighted our case and predicament from the time we landed in this country, and also the NUSS and the ITF for standing by us at all times,” he concluded.