

All at sea over whereabouts of Lankans working on foreign vessels

- Duped by local shipping companies into parting with exorbitant fees and dumped on fishing vessels sans contact with home

By Leon Berenger, Pix by Indika Handuwala and Saman Kariyawasam

A large number of Lankan seafarers who were promised employment on cargo vessels, in return for large fees, have been duped, and instead, dumped on foreign fishing vessels, allegedly by local shipping companies, maritime and trade union officials said yesterday.

The seafarers who had each paid something like Rs 140,000 and more, had been recruited by three local shipping companies their whereabouts unknown, several months after leaving the country, Ranjan Perera with the Colombo-based International Transport Workers Federation (ITWF) said.



Dulanjalie, Mahesh's wife

Eranda's father.

Eranda

Mahesh

“In addition, there has been no communication between the seafarers and their homes, since their departure, indicating that they were being held against their will on the high seas. Their families have also received zero remittances from them,” Mr. Perera added.

Initial investigations have revealed that most of the Sri Lankans were put on boats by a Singapore-based company known as Beverly Shipping that deals with recruitment of deck hands for fishing vessels.

“As is the present case, the Sri Lankans will be forced to remain on these vessels on the high

seas for a considerable period of time, since these are long-stay boats that operate in the deep seas.

This could be one explanation to the zero silence in communication between the men and their families back home,” President- National Union of Seafarers Sri Lanka (NUSS), Palitha Athukorale told the Sunday Times.

He added that, the recruiting agents-Western Legend and York Shipping, located at Dehiwala and Wellawatte respectively, have been traced, and they should take total responsibility for the plight of the Lankan seafarers.

During discussions between the NUSS, ITF and the agents, it appeared that they were trying to pass the buck on to the Singapore-based company. This should never be the case, and if the matter is not settled at the earliest, and the seafarers allowed to return to their home country, the matter will be taken up with the Ministry of External Affairs,” Mr. Athukorale said.

Mahesh Pushpakumar was recruited by York Shipping on May 27 last year, after he paid Rs 190,000, but to date, there has been no word from him, his young wife, Dulanjalie lamented to the Sunday Times.

She added that a complaint was made to the Wellawatte Police and also to the Merchant Shipping office some two weeks ago, but there has been no response so far.

“The agent informed us that my husband had boarded a vessel from Singapore, but did not elaborate. We do not know the type of vessel or its current location. Furthermore, we do not even know if he is still alive,”she added.

She said that her husband had boarded the vessel along with five other Sri Lankans, and their families have also complained to the Wellawatte Police. Her views were shared by Mr. Eranda Wickramaratne who said his son was recruited as a Wiper by Western Legend Shipping Company on July 15 last year, after paying a fee of Rs 140,000, and they have not heard from him since then.

“We have gone to the shipping company, the police and the External Affairs Ministry, but to no avail. We are not interested in money anymore or lame excuses by the agent and so on. We need our son back home, and at the very earliest,” the enraged father said.

He added that he had also lodged a complaint with the Colombo Fraud Investigation Bureau (CFIB) who had later referred the matter to the Dehiwala Police. Director General Merchant Shipping Ajith Seneviratne said they were looking into the complaints, adding that, if the allegations are found to be genuine, then the shipping companies behind the recruitment must, and will have to take full responsibility.

He added that a full-scale inquiry will be launched into the complaints, since it was a serious offence, where the standard recruiting procedure has been violated. “If they (the shipping companies) have violated the regulations, they will be dealt with firmly, and necessary action taken, where even their licence will come under review,” Mr. Seneviratne added.

Low life on the high seas checked and rectified

A Taiwan-owned fishing vessel was detained at the Colombo Port, after the crew complained of torture and non-payment of wages by the vessel’s owner, maritime and embassy officials said.

The owner, a Taiwan national, who also sails on the boat, is alleged to have beaten and tied up the Indonesian crew members to the boat railings for even the slightest mistakes.

“We boarded the vessel ‘Longyield 2’ with the local authorities and confronted the suspect who was thoroughly warned and allowed to sail out of Colombo Port, Abdullah Zulkisli, First Secretary- Indonesian Embassy in Colombo said. He added that the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) and the police in Taiwan had been alerted to maintain a watch on this vessel.

He said that the Indonesian crew members were also taken off the vessel and sent back home, after all their back wages due to them was settled in full. The crew on the vessel that included a mix bag of various nationalities, had first complained to the Colombo-based ITF Inspector, Ranjan Perera who later took the matter up with the Embassy.

“We intended to arrest the suspect and detain the vessel, but with the intervention of the Embassy, the matter was settled amicably, with a strong warning to the boat owner,” Mr. Perera added. Meanwhile, a second fishing vessel, ‘Tawariq 2 also owned by a Taiwan national, was detained after the crew complained of non-payment of wages for nearly a year-and-a-half.

The owner, who was on board, was later ordered to release the wages of the crew, before being allowed to leave Colombo Port, Mr. Perera said.

Recruit agreed to work aboard fishing vessel- Agent

An official with the Western Legend Shipping Company said that they were in touch with the agent in Singapore, adding that the seafarer had agreed to board the fishing vessel prior to leaving the country.

Crew Manager Shafraz Areef said that both parties had agreed on the status of the employment and there was no necessity to complain.

However, he conceded that there has been a delay in the wages and that they were presently working towards settling the matter. However, the seafarer’s father, E. Wickramaratne refuted the shipping company’s, saying that, his son was promised a job on a cargo vessel, for a fee of Rs 140, 000.

