

Fate unknown of Lankan seamen aboard hijacked ship

- Somali pirates demand \$4m for release of ship, crew hijacked last November

The fate of five Sri Lankan merchant sailors remain unknown five months after they were grabbed by Somali pirates, while sailing between Malaysia and the African coast, a senior official with the International workers Federation (ITF) said yesterday.

Sri Lanka's ITF representative Ranjan Perera said that, according to investigations carried out to date, the Lankans, along with some 21 other foreign crew members are currently being held at the pirate stronghold of Garad.

He said the pirates have demanded a US\$ 4 million ransom for the release of the vessel and crew hijacked on November 26. Meanwhile, the ITF has stepped in to help out a woman whose husband is on board the vessel, Mr. Perera said.

Shamikka Perera, a mother of three and wife of Niroshan, a welder-fitter on board the Malaysian-flagged MV Albedo, said that the company, to date, had failed to release any due wages, and that, she was struggling to make ends meet, with the youngest who is just four, suffering from a chronic heart disease.

"I have been everywhere-the External Affairs Ministry, the Foreign Employment Bureau and even to the local shipping agent, but the results have been negative to date", Ms Perera, who hails from Munnankara in the Negombo electorate, said.



In desperation she turned up at the office of the National Union of Seafarers (NUSS) at Lauries Road, Bambalapitiya, where she was directed to the ITF. NUSS President Palitha Athukorale said they decided to step in and help Ms. Perera, since she is a deserving case, and also because her husband is a registered member of their union.

President of the National Union of Seafarers Sri Lanka (NUSS) Palitha Athukorale and ITF local representative Ranjan Perera are seen handing over Rs. 100,000 in cash to Shammika Perera at the Union office in Lauries Rd. Colombo 4 earlier this week.

Therefore, we made several appeals to the ITF in London, detailing her position and requested it be treated as an exceptional case, largely because of the sick child she has to nurse, which requires a lot of money.

The ITF has decided to provide an aid package from cash to kind, such as building materials, since her home was affected during the recent deluge in the area. Monies will be also diverted towards medicines and nutrition required by the sick child, Mr. Athukorale said.

On Wednesday, the ITF handed over Rs 100,000 in cash to Ms Perera towards this end, he added.

Local agent for Majestic Enrich Shipping M.K.M. Imran said there was very little they could do in this connection, since the pirates have remained incommunicado with the company in Malaysia.

“As it has been the case in the past with similar cases, the company will have to pay some part of the ransom, if the seafarers are to be freed,” Mr. Imran said. A senior official of the Merchant Shipping Corporation said that such cases were difficult to handle since Colombo has no diplomatic representation in that country mostly governed by warlords.

“Everything depends on the outcome of the talks between the pirates and the shipping company”, he said. Apart from the five on the MV Albedo, another Lankan is also being held for the past eight months by the same pirates.