

Lankan cargo vessel detained in Durban

By Leon Berenger

Sri Lanka's only cargo vessel, the Lanka Mahapola, has been detained at the Durban Port in South Africa for non-payment of wages to the crew, maritime sources said yesterday. They said the vessel was detained on May 17 on a directive from a local court following written complaints by several members of the crew that they had not received their wages for two months and conditions on the ship were poor.

All but two of the 26-member crew that includes seven officers are Sri Lankans while the remaining two are Ukrainians.

The vessel carrying general cargo had sailed into Durban from the Saudi Arabian port of Jeddah.

According to the sources the International Transport workers Federation (ITF) was looking after the interests of the crew members in cooperation with its head office in London.

The vessel owned by the Ceylon Shipping Corporation had been leased out to a private company, Triple. S. Shipping, which was responsible for the crew and the cargo on board. W. T. Wickramaarachchi, a senior official with Triple. S. Shipping told the Sunday Times from a location in Durban that the matter would be settled in a day or two and denied any wrong doing by the company.

Mr. Wickramaarachchi who flew to Durban following the latest developments said the two Ukrainians were causing the trouble and that the Lankan crew members were cooperating with the company. He denied that the company was in arrears of payment to the crew or that conditions on board were poor.

However ITF sources in Durban said the bulk of the crew, excluding the officers had already submitted written complaints and this led to the detention of the ship.

They added that most of the crew members were set to sign off once the wages issue was cleared and return to Colombo at the earliest. The Lanka Mahapola was involved in a heated stand-off between the captain and the crew late last year over the same issue at a port in Sudan and subsequently the bulk of the crew signed-off once they had received their dues.

Officials with the Ceylon Shipping Corporation said it was the responsibility of the company to settle the matter since the vessel had been leased to it.