

Search on for vessel missing at sea

Two Lankans among crew of nine

By Leon Berenger

A search was launched for a foreign-flagged landing craft with a nine-member crew, including two Sri Lankans, after it went missing on July 10, while sailing from the southern port of Hambantota to Trincomalee in the east.

The Iranian registered 'Queen Mary' sailing under a Tanzanian flag and hired from a firm in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has 'disappeared' without a trace, along with millions of rupees worth of heavy salvage equipment.



Director- Fumhiko Engineering Co. Chammika de Silva
NUSS President Palitha Athukorale

The equipment that includes 55-ton crawler crane, three anchors, a generator and other machinery, is worth around Rs 40 million, and is owned by the Peliyagoda-based Fumihiko Engineering Co., which hired the vessel for Rs 250,000 per day.

"The vessel is maintaining total radio silence since it went missing, which only goes to suggest that the captain and crew had deliberately detoured, perhaps with the intention of stealing the equipment," Director- Fumhiko Engineering Co., Chammika de Silva told the Sunday Times.

He said they had already taken up the matter with the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), the Port Authorities, and even sent representatives to talk with officials with the UAE firm, but the whereabouts of the boat is still not known. The company was involved in salvaging scrap iron from sunken ships around the country, while the vessel was used to transport the heavy machinery and equipment needed for this purpose. He said that the vessel was sailing to Pulmoddai, to begin salvage operations on a Malaysian-owned ship that was sunk by the LTTE in 1996. The ship was transporting a load of mineral sands when it went down

He added that the company's operation was legal, since they were the sub agent to another local group-Asha Agencies, which has a mandate from the Ministry of Defence (MoD) to remove scrap iron from wrecks.

"Furthermore, we have obtained port clearance from the customs and the Ceylon Fisheries Harbours Corporation," Mr. de Silva added. "Everything is legal, there is no doubt on that," he said.

However, controversy surrounds this claim, with the relevant authorities saying that the vessel was not known to be sailing in the country's waters, and therefore, it had violated maritime regulations.

Director General- Merchant Shipping, A.W.H.S.S.R. Weerakoon pointed out that he was totally in the dark about the presence of this vessel in the country's waters, and that, he had never endorsed any salvaging of shipwrecks.

"This is news to me. Apparently, these people have been carrying out some clandestine operation. My approval is needed before any salvaging can be carried out, and it is not there," Mr. Weerakoon said. A senior naval official said that only one firm had received MoD approval to carry out salvaging of shipwrecks in the country's waters.

He said that, as far as this missing vessel is concerned, it was a matter for Merchant Shipping and the Ports Authority to look into. He added that, according to latest reports, the 'Queen Mary' was heading to a port in Eastern India, and that the Sri Lankan Mission in Chennai had been alerted.



The Iranian registered 'Queen Mary'

Meanwhile, the National Union for Seafarers Sri Lanka (NUSS) expressed serious concern for the safety and wellbeing of the two Lankan crew members. NUSS President Palitha Athukorale said these two seafarers could be in grave danger, if the intention of the captain and others on the vessel is to hijack the cargo, and that, he had already alerted officials in all Indian ports.

"I have taken up the matter with the International Transport workers Federation (ITF), who in turn have alerted their representatives of the elusive vessel. He said the Union had also discussed the matter with the local company and senior officials of Merchant Shipping.

"The vessel has a stock of only 8,000 tons of fuel, and therefore, it cannot venture far, certainly not beyond India," he said. The two Sri Lankan sailors have been identified as Franklin Rogers Kelaart of Anuradhapura and Madusanka Jayasuriya from Warakapola.