

Sunday Times exposure rescues SL sailors stranded offshore

By Leon Berenger

An article in last week's Sunday Times, citing the plight of nine Sri Lankan seamen onboard a foreign-flagged ship, drew a prompt reaction, as the handlers of the ship promptly paid in cash the due wages of the crew.

The nine sailors on board the Tanzanian-flagged Seagull 2 received US\$ 30,000 plus, equivalent to over Rs. 4 million, as back wages from the Managing Director- Global Marine Services, Ahmed. H. Shaibani, at the office of the National Union of Seafarers (NUSS), Lauries Road, Bambalapitiya, on Monday.

The group had boarded the vessel from a seaport in Japan on February 25 earlier this year, and sailed into Colombo Port on March 21, en route to Tanzania, when trouble began, Ranjan Perera of the International Transport workers Federation (ITF) said.

The crew complained of non-payment of wages, poor quality and low food rations among other hardships they were forced to undergo, while the local shipping agency kept dragging its feet on the issue, despite several reminders from the ITF and General Merchant Shipping Office, Mr. Perera added.



He said the situation remained unchanged, and each time the agency went back on its word, after making promises and assurances that the issue will be settled at the earliest.

Later, the Director General- Merchant Shipping, Ajith Seneviratne summoned the local agent and warned of stern legal action, if the matter was not settled, Mr. Perera added. However, he said that the article in the Sunday Times last week was believed to be the attributing factor for the ship's handlers to settle the matter without being at the receiving end of further adverse publicity, which was detrimental to their reputation and further dealings in the maritime industry.



Scenes (above and below) at the office of the NUSS on Monday. Pix by Athula Devapriya

A day after relatives received the due wages, the crew was offloaded at the southern port of Galle, where the vessel had remained in Off Port Limit (OPL) anchorage for nearly two months. During their anchorage, the crew was forced to beg for food and water from local fishermen going out deep sea, as stocks ran dry owing to inconsistent supplies from shore.

