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Seamen's Church Institute of Philadelphia

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Who's going ashore? Not cargo-ship crews



Michael Perez / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Capt. Anders H.G. Borgstrom of the NCC Asir said the U.S. had cleared his crew to come ashore, but a terminal operator in Phila. said no.

By Henry J. Holcomb
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Tightened security at ports is keeping seafarers cloistered. That isn't good for them or for safety, an affected captain said.

With tightened port security confining crews to their ships for months at a time, sea captains warn that management problems on the high seas are becoming severe.

"Moods turn around from being cheerful to depression, and people are not interested in their work anymore," said Capt. Anders H.G. Borgstrom.

His chemical-carrying ship, NCC Asir, was docked in Northeast Philadelphia this week, but the terminal operator prohibited his 30-man crew from leaving the vessel even though they had been cleared by the government to do so.

To do their jobs safely, "they need time ashore. . . . Imagine how you would feel if you were con-

finied to your office for weeks or months at a time," Borgstrom said.

Others share his concern.

"The situation is getting worse and worse every day. Every captain I deal with feels the same way," said Patrick Hale of Barwil Agencies Inc., the Philadelphia agent who represents Borgstrom's ship and many other tankers whose crews are barred from coming ashore at many of the nation's petroleum terminals.

With 28 temperature-controlled tanks for carrying volatile chemicals, Borgstrom's ship demands high concentration from its officers and crew. That's getting harder to maintain, he said.

By raising these concerns, Borgstrom and Hale are wading into a complex issue related to foreign-flagged ships in the post-9/11 era, said Dennis Rochford, president of the Maritime Exchange for the Bay and River Delaware, a trade group

that includes refinery owners and chemical-dock operators.

"Everything [Borgstrom] said is very real, and you can't walk away from that," he said. "It is becoming more and more of an issue every day. But the potential devastation of an incident at a chemical terminal or refinery is also real. So the industry is taking steps that some might find unreasonable."

Borgstrom declared angrily that he and his crew had been examined by U.S. government agencies and cleared to come ashore.

But Rochford said terminal operators lacked confidence in the government's ability to screen out terrorists.

Borgstrom's ship - painted bright orange to warn of its haz-



Michael Perez / Inquirer Staff Photographer

An unidentified crewman waves to the Rev. James D. Von Dreele, executive director of the Seamen's Church Institute, as he leaves the NCC Asir, a chemical tanker that was docked in Northeast Philadelphia this week. Von Dreele's staff visits most ships that dock here.

ardous cargo - carries a variety of chemicals between Europe and several U.S. ports, including New York, Philadelphia and Houston. His visits here were among the 909 calls by tankers at 15 Delaware River petroleum terminals during the last year - calls that accounted for a third of the river's cargo-ship traffic.

Borgstrom, a native of Sweden who lives in Rio de Janeiro when not at sea, works for Mideast Ship Management Ltd. of Dubai, United Arab Emirates. The ship he commands flies the Norwegian flag but is owned by National Chemical Carrier of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

The officers of his crew are aboard ship for three or four months at a time. For the rest, a typical tour at sea lasts nine months.

Borgstrom said both security and safety were being diminished - not helped - by keeping his crew aboard ship. In recent months he has had to fire two crew members for smuggling alcohol aboard ship,



Von Dreele blesses sacramental bread and wine aboard the NCC Asir. Von Dreele testified at a Coast Guard hearing last month in favor of requiring terminal operators to allow crew to come ashore.



Von Dreele gives holy wine to Bernard Darapiza, a crewman aboard the NCC Asir. Von Dreele has championed rights of seafarers who "have been largely ignored since 9/11," he told the Coast Guard.

violating a strictly enforced safety rule.

The restrictions also weaken transitions when a crew member's tour at sea ends. The departing crew member must leave before the replacement is allowed aboard, Borgstrom said.

So instead of walking through the ship to examine equipment with possible problems, the crews cram exchanges of information into a few minutes, standing by a taxi on the dock, or on the deck of a small boat that transports crew to and from an anchorage, Borgstrom said.

Borgstrom says the restrictions are more about saving money than tightening security. He focused particular anger at Kinder Morgan Inc., the Houston-based owner of the chemical terminal where his ship was docked in Philadelphia.

"Their way of providing security is to do nothing - to ban everything," Borgstrom said.

Borgstrom said he cooperated fully with U.S. officials checking the credentials and backgrounds of his crew. "If they don't pass, they should be detained aboard ship," he said.

Rick Rainey, a Kinder Morgan spokesman, acknowledged that his company had restricted access to

and from ships at its terminals. "Since 9/11 there have been dramatic changes. We are not comfortable having people in our terminals," he said.

But some changes are occurring, Rainey said. In Pasadena, Texas, for example, Kinder Morgan allows a local religious ministry to seafarers to escort crew members out of the terminal aboard its van.

In Philadelphia, it permitted the Rev. James D. Von Dreele, executive director of the Seamen's Church Institute, aboard Borgstrom's ship Tuesday for a worship service.

Von Dreele's staff visits most ships that dock here and offers transportation to its center or to go shopping. After 9/11, virtually all crews were confined to their ships. Now, most general-cargo terminals and a few petroleum docks permit crew with proper papers to come ashore.

The screening process for crews of foreign-flagged vessels is being improved on several fronts. For example, the Delaware River Maritime Enterprise Council of Trevese, Bucks County, is developing an international computer network, called RISK Alert, that enables ship operators to provide

law enforcement with crew information, including photos, long before the ship arrives in the United States, said William Shepard, manager of the project.

The Coast Guard, now part of the Department of Homeland Security, is reviewing its rules regarding ship crews. Von Dreele testified at a Coast Guard hearing last month in favor of requiring that terminal operators allow crew, with proper papers, to come ashore.

“The needs and rights of vast numbers of merchant seafarers have been largely ignored since 9/11. On a daily basis chaplains throughout the country hear anger and resentment about the inhumane conditions under which they must work because they are denied shore leave in the U.S.,” Von Dreele testified.

“We are like prisoners, stuck in a small space, seeing the same old faces day after day,” said Borgstrom’s ship’s chief cook,

Edwardo Fernandez of the Philippines. “We need to go ashore to shop and relax.”

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Seamen’s Church Institute of Philadelphia

Thursday, September 4, 2003

Local groups help foreign sailors endure on detained cargo ship



Michael Perez
Inquirer Staff Photographer

Eight Turkish sailors have been stranded since their ship was “arrested” in June off Bucks County. They are expected to remain until a case between a German bank and the ship’s owner goes to trial Sept. 23.

By Jennifer Moroz
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Eight Turkish sailors remain stranded on a cargo ship detained along a bank of the Delaware River in early June, victims of a legal tug-of-war between the ship’s owner and a German bank.

Twenty-one crew members were originally aboard the Istanbul-based Ahmet Bey, which was unloading cargo in Bucks County when a federal judge in Philadelphia ordered it “arrested.”

Thirteen have been allowed to go home in the last month, but

only after more than two months of confinement on the docked ship, questions of port safety and immigration stalling their return to Turkey.

It is a case that, while little-known, has been followed closely by a local organization devoted to helping stranded seafarers and by the area’s Turkish community, which has worked during the last few months to bring the comforts of the outside world to men who could see it only from a ship’s deck.

“Everybody has really been working hard to take care of the

crew,” said Jack Mudge, chief operating officer of the Seamen’s Church Institute in Philadelphia, which has led the outreach effort. “It’s been a long process, and I think it will continue, but the crew is in good shape. Frustrated, but in good shape.”

The eight remaining crew members - the minimum required to man the 13-ton cargo ship, berthed at the Tioga Marine Terminal - are expected to remain on board until the case goes to trial Sept. 23 in U.S. District Court in Philadelphia.

The Hamburg-based HSH Nordbank contends that the ship’s owner, Odin Denizcilik A.S., defaulted on mortgage payments on the vessel and owes more than \$750,000 in principal and interest. The ship management company denies the allegations.

Ships owned by the same family of companies have also been detained in South Africa, China, Singapore and Sweden, said Ed Cattell, a Philadelphia lawyer representing the bank. He said the



Crew members smoke on the Ahmet Bey's deck. So far, 13 sailors have been sent home.

companies collectively owed his client more than \$19 million.

Others have made similar claims.

The Ahmet Bey, which left Egypt on May 12 with steel products bound for Bucks County, was detained for the second time June 6. It had first been ordered arrested at Novolog Bucks County Inc. a few days earlier, after a supplier contended that it, too, was owed money.

The ship's owner resolved that claim, and the ship was ordered released the same day the new arrest warrant was issued, said lawyer Ann-Michele Higgins, who is representing the company locally.

The bank has asked District Court Judge John R. Padova sever-

al times to force the sale of the ship, but the company has resisted.

The case, the company hoped, would be resolved in its favor and the ship would set sail again.

Meanwhile, 21 sailors were trapped on board, without the immigration papers necessary to wait out the battle on American soil.

"It's just been a nightmare," Higgins said. "They've been so good about it."

From the beginning of their confinement, the men were drawing a wage, and their employers were also providing food and other basic items.

The hardest part for the sailors was having nothing to keep them occupied, said Mudge, of the Seamen's Church Institute.

So his organization stepped in with diversion. Bored crew members had set up a soccer field in the hull. Mudge and his colleagues sent in teams, including Mudge's own, that the sailors could play against.

"Of course, they beat us," Mudge said, laughing.

The organization provided Ping-Pong and foosball tables, TVs and VCRs to entertain the men. The Turkish-American Society helped find translators, and volunteers began teaching the men English and taking them hamburgers.

They were also given cell phones and phone cards to keep in touch with family.

The men, many of them working on ships to lift their families out of poverty, do not hold anything against their employer, Mudge said. But those who have boarded the ship have found themselves in the position of ambassador, calming the sailors' anger at the United States for having their ship detained, Mudge said.

All in all, about 1,000 staff and volunteer hours have been devoted to the Turkish crew, Mudge said.

Along the way, the sailors' numbers have dwindled. On Aug. 16, Padova ordered six sent back to Turkey. That left 15 - the minimum number required by Turkish rules to man the ship.

For safety reasons, the Coast Guard refused to let the number drop below that. So an appeal was made to Turkish officials, who reduced the minimum to eight because the ship was not sailing.

On Aug. 27, Padova ordered seven more sent home, leaving eight.

Those men are in good hands, Mudge said, but will not be going anywhere anytime soon.

"The reality is they probably won't be sent anywhere until the case is resolved," he said.

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