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Who's going ashore? Not cargo-ship crews

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Date: August 22, 2003

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 confined 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 hazardous 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, 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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PUBLICATION: Philadelphia Inquirer, The (PA)