

ITF alleges Indian 'pay to work' scam on arrested Vietnamese handysize

Union investigators believe crewing provider has been making cadets pay for jobs to earn seafaring papers

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A ship arrest at Port Sudan has turned the spotlight towards practices in the Indian crewing business.

Three cadet seafarers on the 28,200-dwt Vietnamese handysize bulker *Charlene* (built 1996) said they have been paying Indian crewing companies for the privilege of working, and documented the transactions for the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) trade union.

Mumbai-based crewing agent Marinezone Shipping Services and Haiphong shipowner NHK Shipping characterised cadets Brighesh Kannan, Abidas Fakkiri and Jeyaprakash Ebi Andrews as troublemakers.

But the cadets responded that Marinezone began circulating faked documents about them days after they spoke to the ITF.

The *Charlene*, like all four ships in the fleet of NHK Shipping, is owned by US-Vietnamese company HN Global Shipping. An NHK official told TradeWinds that the company was set up last year as the operator of four ships that HN Global acquired from Vietnamese bulker owner Tan Binh.

The Tuvalu-flagged *Charlene* sails with 16 Vietnamese and six Indian crew members, the latter sourced through Marinezone.

"We have never asked any crew to pay INR 600 [\$7.25] per month regarding their sign-off update," wrote an official of Marinezone who did not sign their name. The official added that the complainants "are tarnishing the good image of our firm with respect to personal benefit which our company management team are still not able to understand".

"What the ITF said is not true," NHK official LK Tuan told TradeWinds, insisting that crew welfare on the vessel is good.

But ITF flag of convenience campaign consultant John Wood believes the documents. "It's there in black and white," he said. "And what don't talk, don't lie."

Bank statements and messaging records apparently show crewing agents demanding monthly payments of INR 600 in return for updating crew record books, in addition to an INR 400,000 (\$4,840) "joining fee", with funds going to Marinezone affiliates Unigro Shipping and Al-Huzair Marine Services.

Union officials said Unigro disappeared after complaints to Indian shipping authorities. Seafarers visited Al-Huzair's listed physical address in Mumbai and did not find it.

At "poverty wages" of \$270 to \$400 per month, the union noted that the "joining fee" exceeded a year's salary, but said the cadets were able to draw on family resources to pay it in order to earn documented service at sea.

The seafarers signed on in August and December of 2021, and finally were repatriated to India last month in the midst of a stalemated arrest at Port Sudan.

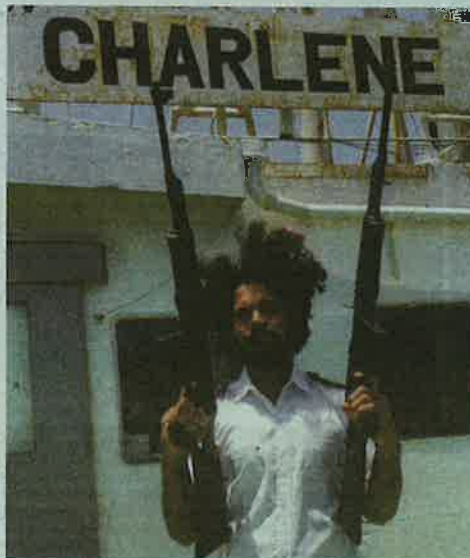
"They paid for their jobs," said Wood, who learned of the alleged pay-to-work deal by accident after investigating the long shipboard times of the three crew members and their difficulties in winning repatriation. He was aghast.

"Why would you pay that much?" he asked Kannan. "You'd have to work years to earn it back."

"To get our tickets" was the answer, referring to the licences that they could receive based in part on the "sea-service confirma-

FIRED UP: Indian cadet Brighesh Kannan, pictured right and below brandishing rifles on the deck of the *Charlene*, offered documents to show he paid crewing agency Marinezone to work on the ship. His former employer said the ship's master disciplined them 'stringently' for an unauthorised armed photo shoot

Photos: Marinezone Shipping Services



sure they would wish to avoid and which would doubtless be unacceptable to them."

A West of England spokesman told TradeWinds that the club had "been made aware of allegations from crew members concerning aspects of their contractual employment and has been in liaison with the ITF and the owners. Should the club's Maritime Labour Convention certification be engaged, then we will of course respond accordingly".

In documents provided by Marinezone, the master of the *Charlene* faults the three cadets for complaining, spreading rumours about the company, keeping untidy cabins and not cutting their hair.

The crewing agent adds that on one occasion they helped themselves to "coastguard weapons" for an unauthorised photo shoot that elicited "stringent action" from the *Charlene*'s master.

Former cadet Brighesh Kannan responded by saying Marinezone had circulated faked documents about him within two days of learning the ITF had been contacted.

Unlike the unlicensed Vietnamese crew, he and his Indian colleagues spoke English when they joined the vessel and had completed a relevant three-year college degree.

"We have been very good on board," he wrote. "The photos they posted [are] in Sudan where

ation" that a crewing agency has a duty to provide to the Indian Directorate General of Shipping.

In an email that TradeWinds has seen, Hong Kong claims boss Quentin Drew of the West of England P&I Club wrote: "If the facts as described by the ITF are

indeed true, the situation is unacceptable and it is very important that this matter is redressed in the seafarers' favour promptly.

"To do otherwise may have reputational repercussions on the shipowners, which we are

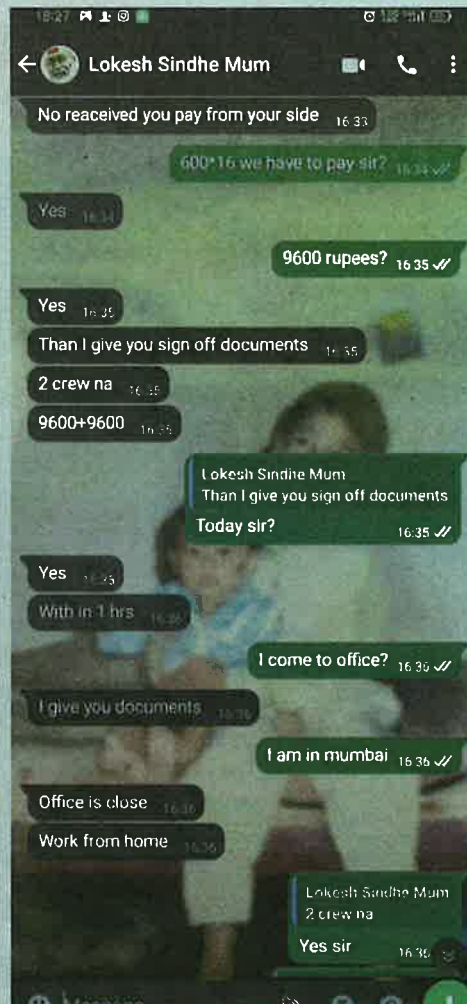


we were asking [to] sign off. With the permission of the armed guards, we used the armed gun for photos."

Tuan characterised NHH's

employment of Indian cadets as "help". Aspiring seafarers with no experience "work on our vessel to upgrade their competence licences to find better job

chances". "[We] will stop our help if they continue to complain more," Tuan said. "We please repeat that all crews' welfare is well."



OFF MESSAGE: Cadet Brigesh Kannan provided ITF officials with documents including this text exchange to show he paid for monthly stamps in his sea book: '600 x 16 we have to pay, sir?' 'Yes' '9,600 rupees?' 'Yes. Then I give you sign-off documents'

INDIAN TRADER RIKA STYMIES NEW VIETNAM OPERATOR WITH ARREST

Fledgling Vietnamese bulker operator NHH Shipping has lost the use of one of its four ships during its first year in business, and suspects fraud on the part of an Indian charterer.

The 28,200-dwt Charlene (built 1996), remains at Port Sudan under arrest by the cargo receiver, an affiliate of Indian commodities trader Rika Global Impex, which arrested the ship in August last year with a damage claim greater than its resale value.

The ship had just arrived from Mumbai with a cargo of bagged sugar. AIS records show the vessel arriving laden at Port Sudan on 30 August.

An operational source with information about the dispute said Rika Global Impex's claim is in the range of \$15m. Vessels-Value estimates the Charlene to be worth \$6.01m.

The arresting party told a Sudanese court that the Charlene's cargo was spoiled by mois-

ture and it placed blame with the shipowner.

But NHH rejects the claim, and a company official has told TradeWinds that cargo surveyors found no evidence that seawater had entered the holds, either in the form of traces of chlorides in the sugar cargo or that the hold was not watertight.

TradeWinds has contacted Rika Global Impex for comment.

NHH executive LK Tuan told TradeWinds that the company expects to initiate arbitration over the matter in Singapore soon.

The fleet of Haiphong-based NHH consists of veteran vessels formerly in the fleet of Vietnam's Tan Binh Shipping, all acquired last year by US-Vietnamese shipowner HN Global Shipping. The three handies and one supramax have an average age of 23 years.

Reference sources list the owner of HN Global as Hau Minh Nguyen of Boston.

Tuan told TradeWinds that NHH



UNAFFECTED: The 23,500-dwt open hatch bulk carrier HN Ace (ex-Tan Binh 45, built 1996) is one of four former Tan Binh ships that make up the NHH Shipping fleet

and its lawyers are suspicious of fraud in the case and said he believes the charterer, shipper and receiver are all part of the same group.

"The claim was rejected by us [and the] vessel's P&I because not only [was there] no evidence of chloride in cargo samples test, but also all holds/hatches were tight

during the voyage," Tuan wrote in an email statement, and added that the cargo surveyor's investigation indicated that the damage was inherent in the cargo.

NHH is represented in the arrest case by its P&I club, the West of England. A spokesman said in a statement to TradeWinds: "The club has been working closely with

its members and the local authorities to have the cargo of sugar discharged in Port Sudan. Efforts in that regard continue."

Tuan told TradeWinds that the company trades worldwide, but its focus is on Asia. Despite one ship being out of action for more than four months, he said the company is searching for more tonnage.

NHH's vessels are mostly crewed by Vietnamese nationals but TradeWinds has separately reported on a labour dispute involving Indian cadets, who recently served on the Charlene and were recruited by Mumbai-based crewing agency Marinezone Shipping Services.

The cadets have presented documentation to the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) in support of their claim that they paid crewing agents hefty fees for their jobs and also for sea-service certification. Marinezone and NHH have rejected the allegations.