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Sunset in the west

THE dispute about the nationality of shore-side staff masks the decline in the profession of seafaring in the west.

Visa restrictions and difficult-to-obtain work permits for non-western citizens are a feature of modern life. Given that economic migration, whether it is skilled employees filling positions where there is a shortage of trained nationals or not, is such a source of vehement political discussion — however much some of it might be illogical, ill-informed and at times bigoted — that it is hard to see it ever being not so.

However, in relation to the lack of trained shore-

side staff in the west, it is not entirely clear-cut. Non-national master mariners should be eligible for employment as, say, harbourmaster of Peterhead, if there are no qualified local candidates, but the reason for the shortage of local candidates is because shipowners and operators are increasingly reluctant to employ higher-salaried western staff. Without those officers having 20 years' experience at sea, where are the trained shore-side staff in the west supposed to come from?

On another note, the job credentials of Peterhead harbourmaster involves a host of social and diplomatic functions that come with its role as a fishing port and hub for supplying the offshore industry; as well as understanding the local accent. These will differ wildly from his counterpart in Portland.

Spinnaker Recruitment chairman Phil Parry claimed that the divide between western and developing nations' seafaring salaries had almost disappeared, but the spate of recession-induced redundancies at carriers suggest one reason why: there are fewer and fewer western officers working.

This is compounded by the brittle supply chain of future officers. Senior western officers are heading towards retirement and will be off the job market within the next two decades, and there are few junior officers coming up through the ranks to replace them because the carriers prefer to employ Filipino, Indian or Indonesian junior officers instead, presumably because of salary differences.

Even if there were no visa restrictions, the classic maritime career path — initially seafaring, then shore-side — rarely exists in the Filipino psyche, and it is unlikely that the dearth of shore-side staff can be compensated for there.

Is big really better?

BIG lines may be able to gain economies of scale, but what is the point of that if they lose the flexibility to respond quickly to particular market developments?

That is the debate in the liner trades right now as customers of the global carriers continue to grumble about a lack of containers, and others insist that there is ample availability to meet shipper requirements.

So who is telling the truth? In fact, both sides are correct. The large lines, with their multi-port networks and reduced vessel speeds, are undoubtedly running into problems in certain parts of the world and are not always able to provide a sufficient number of containers. But smaller carriers can take action not readily available to their larger competitors.

That at least is the position as far as The Containership Company is concerned. The newcomer says it has overcome the container shortage by temporarily removing one vessel from its transpacific loop and increasing ship speeds. By doing that, the line has reduced the number of containers in the supply chain, and so alleviated the supply squeeze.

If a line is operating a pendulum between two ports, as TCC does, then it is fairly easy to make those schedule adjustments. The big carriers with their complex rotations cannot readily make changes of that sort.

So the moral of the tale is that there should be room in the market for both, leaving customers to choose between big or small, depending on the circumstances. ■

Industry Viewpoint



JOHN CARTNER

Masters must learn to navigate the law

The criminalisation of seafarers brings delay and added cost to a voyage as well as harassment and detention of individuals. But there are ways to reduce risk with training, information and support

OUR industry deals in large things, concepts, volumes and people — sometimes larger than life. We are long on history and past, a status shared by religion, law and politics. We have outlived nations, empires, kings, princes, governments and wars. We are entrusted annually with more value than any state gross domestic product or defence budget. Our ships require great capital. They are the largest mobile earth-bound contrivances and are the only machines wherein the people who operate them live in them.

The person on a ship with whom every interested party talks is the master. He makes local decisions and takes local heat. We transact with public and private bodies which enforce standards and laws upon our machines and their people. However, masters are often abused and sometimes criminalised by the self-same bodies which rely on us. How can this be?

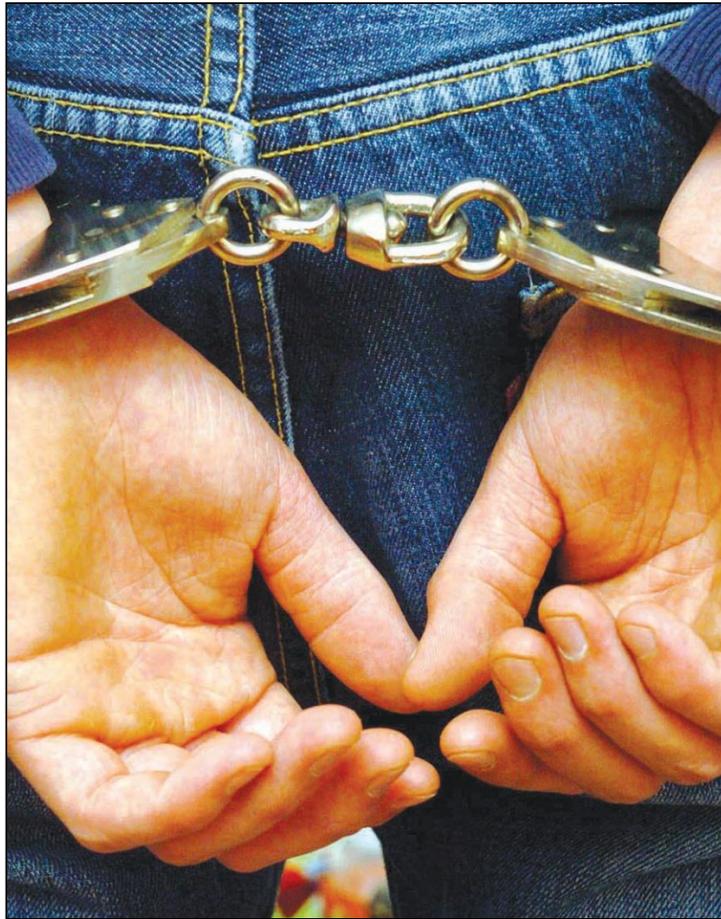
Frankly, no one has come up with an answer except identifying social variables producing the phenomenon. We can rail against it; we have not been able to deter it. We can, however, limit it.

A vessel entering a state is often disadvantaged. This means a higher probability of harassment, delay, detention, listing and arrest of its officers for crimes. Criminalising states are often Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development members. The US is the current leader, with France not far behind. These and others use laws as weapons and not for justice. One factor is common: some states have compared the rights of seafarers and their immediate concerns with pollution and have chosen aspirations of environmental purity over human rights.

What does this mean? More cost. For a brief period in recent weeks, dry bulk rates declined to \$10,000 per day. It takes not much time off hire at that rate, proximately caused by an overzealous government functionary, to put a marginal voyage into the red permanently or to make a losing voyage lose more.

How can the risk be reduced? We need to accept that in this asymmetrical relationship information is power. We must use information to increase our power against the larger powers governments wield. Our masters — who are the point men — should have available to them current knowledge of the governments of the states being entered. Our masters should be trained to deal with government agents and be equipped with sufficient information to deal effectively, efficiently, lawfully and properly without being entrapped, blindsided, tricked or abused because of lack of information. We do this for piracy. We must now do so for governments if we are to control costs.

This means that masters should be trained. First, he or she — and likely other officers — should know with whom they deal. Knowledge in detail of the structures and uses of the various coastguards and their tactics will reduce the fear and anxiety such boardings produce. That helps



A common factor among criminalising states is that some have put seafarers' rights in the balance with pollution only to decide that environmental purity outweighs human rights.

officers to better deal with them. Such information may be disseminated by the owner in formal training. To be sure, BIMCO, the ICS and others have put out generic pamphlets attempting to advise masters. They do not go far enough.

The master, especially, should know in detail when to co-operate and as importantly when not to co-operate and when to demand immediate legal protection and consular and owner assistance. The master should know the rights of foreigners in the entering state and should be trained to use this knowledge to show a boarding officer that he knows and that he is confident in his knowledge. The company must back him with local legal presence should he ask for it.

Second, the master should know where he stands in jurisdictional law at any time. He should have the information at hand to know when and where and by whom he might be lawfully boarded, when and where he crosses from the high seas to the exclusive economic zone of the entry state, where the contiguous zone and the territorial sea begin, when the ship will be there, what special customs and security zones the state can or may establish and where there limits are. He should be as situationally aware as he is with the vessel's state.

Third, the owner should be keeping this and more information available for briefing a master prior to the voyage and provide the tools necessary for the master to communicate to obtain guidance. This means that the owner needs to know what the master knows and vice versa. In time of declared war we brief our masters. We must recognise that these affairs — although not called war — are the same.

In short, master and owner should have a legal voyage plan worked out as carefully as the navigation plan and the security plan and other required plans. If the master has an integrated understanding of the voyage — including its legality — he or she will reduce the probability of being harassed and criminalised, which will reduce the probability of delay and detention and which will minimise additional costs.

Training will delay the inevitable, in which a legal mate is embarked on each voyage — as has been facetiously offered by some observers. ■

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Maritime Blogspot

Undeclared war that puts seafarers in the firing line

SURE, there have always been occasions throughout history on which people have taken pot shots at hapless merchant seafarers. The trouble is, those occasions are becoming increasingly commonplace, and there isn't even a war on.

At the time of writing, the forensics boys were doing whatever it is that forensics boy do, in a bid to find out just what happened to Japanese-controlled VLCC *M.Star* in the Strait of Hormuz last week. But all the early indications are that the explosion on board was the work of somebody who didn't wish the crew too well.

That seems to me to be taking things to a whole new level. Yes, piracy often gets nasty. But generally the name of the game is capture the crew alive along with the ship, if only to add to the ransom value of the package as whole.

Ramming a speedboat laden with high explosives into the hull of a tanker, as was seen with *Limburg* in the port of Aden in 2002, is a different matter. Anybody prepared to do something like that is obviously out to terminate seafaring careers — not to mention their own lives — with extreme prejudice.

One school of thought is that the attempt against *M.Star* was the work of a suicide bomber who detonated a few metres too soon, and therefore did not succeed in doing the business. Certainly the pictures of the indentation in the hull look familiar to those of us who can remember the earlier incident.

I also hear tell of an ominous advance in rocket propelled grenade technology. RPGs, of course, are a longstanding favourite with Somali pirates, and shedloads of them have landed on ships without doing too much damage.

But so-called Explosively Formed Penetrators are a new type of warhead that have the capacity to penetrate the armour of even the best battle tanks. Could the do the same to a double-hulled vessel?

Obviously, no one has so far rushed forward to volunteer to test the proposition. But given that the kit has been circulating in some of the dodgier parts of the Middle East for the last few years, it may only be a matter of time before some poor unfortunate is accorded that unwanted honour.

It is difficult to see what can be done to protect seafarers. These kinds of attacks can come out of the blue, and don't forget the very notion of "turning round a supertanker" has entered popular speech as a simile for things that cannot be achieved in a hurry.

Suggestions of a terrorist spectacular aimed at cutting off a key maritime chokepoint have extensively been made ever since 9/11. So far that hasn't happened. But never say never. ■ *Barratry's is an irreverent place, designed for opinionated takes on daily maritime news, where the only unwelcome opinion is a conventional one. We invite you to join the discussion. <http://barratry.blogs.lloydslist.com>*