

Distant-water workers

Another Filipino story

The experience of seven Filipino workers on board Taiwanese longliners is a tale of breach of contract

All seven of them come from the northern Luzon province of the Philippines, but until they met at the Manila office of Cristie Fernandez, the main recruiting agent in the country for Taiwanese longliners, they had not known one another.

Jerson Hipol and Ronel Agtang each have a bachelor's degree in Marine Transport, while Teodulo Aban holds a degree in Marine Engineering, apart from having done a year's apprenticeship at sea. Rufino Pinacate and Alfredo Ramos have a diploma in electronics and automobile engineering respectively. The remaining two, Arthur Umalos and Domingo Soliva, however, were farm hands.

Teodulo is 23, Rufino, 27 and Domingo is 28. All the others are 25 years old. Rufino is the only one who is married—his wife works in a factory in Manila. He also has three children being brought up in his village by his wife's sister.

These Filipinos had to pay different amounts of money—ranging from 18,000 to 25,000 pesos—to be recruited as fishermen. The better the qualification, the more you pay. A couple of them used their savings or family money to pay up, while the others had to borrow at high interest rates either from banks or from moneylenders. The loans have to be paid back on their return on completion of their contracts with the longliners.

None of them had any prior experience in fishing. They had different motives for joining the fishing industry. The technically trained ones wanted to gain experience at sea and graduate to the merchant navy. They thought fishing would give them such an opportunity. The farm hands wanted to be masters of their own destiny. They wanted to make

some money, return to their respective villages and invest their savings in tractors. They would then make a living renting out their tractors.

Their contracts, all individually signed, were for a period of three years. A contract typically offered them a monthly salary of US\$200 to work on board *Jin Long Fa*, a Taiwanese longliner. (The exception was Ramos, who had a contract to work on *Ta Fu 3*.) In addition, there would be free meals. Coffee, tea and toiletries, however, had to be bought with their own money. The contract clearly laid down the nature of their work: to put in 18 to 22 hours at a stretch in tuna longlining. They were not entitled to any leave unless the captain, at his own discretion, gave them an off-period.

Alfredo Ramos, who left the Philippines on 2 June 1997 and was flown further to Mauritius on 5 June, had to join the crew of *Jin Long Fa*, although his contract was for *Ta Fu 3*. The others were flown from Manila to Singapore on 5 June, and, after three days, they were further flown to Mauritius to join the crew of *Ta Fu 3*, instead of *Jin Long Fa*. In the meantime, all of them had to surrender their signed contracts to the representative of Victor Lim, the broker of the fishing vessels in Singapore.

Many responsibilities

The Filipino lads were trained in longlining on board by four other Filipinos, who subsequently left the vessel on completion of their contracts. Their main job was to bait and pay the line; to retrieve it after a gap of seven hours; and to remove the fish to the hold. There were additional responsibilities such as attaching/removing the baited line to/from the main line, throwing the buoys, gutting and gilling the fish,

maintaining the temperature of the fish hold, and locating, with the aid of a searchlight and radio buoys, the snapped lines. There was some degree of automation to pay the line.

After putting in a year of service on *Ta Fu 3*, those on board were transferred, that too at mid-sea, to *Jin Long Fa*. The captain of *Ta Fu 3* told them that the captain of *Jin Long Fa* was the brother of the master (meaning, the owner) of his vessel and assured them that they will be paid for the months they had worked on *Ta Fu 3*. The transfer apparently was because the captain of *Ta Fu 3* had completed the tenure with the master and the vessel had to return to Taiwan. Also, it was prohibited to return to Taiwan with foreign workers on board. While transferring six Filipinos to *Jin Long Fa*, six Chinese workers were exchanged for *Ta Fu 3*. Also, all the equipment on board *Ta Fu 3* was transferred to *Jin Long Fa*.

The captains on both vessels and the first engineer of *Ta Fu 3* were Taiwanese. All others were either Chinese or Filipinos. There were 26 people working on board, including the captain; the first and second engineers; the first and second bosons; the cook; and the crew, numbering about 20. This comprised 13 Chinese (mainland) and seven Filipinos on *Jin Long Fa*, and 14 Chinese and six Filipinos on *Ta Fu 3*. The Chinese were younger and less

experienced than the Filipinos and could be bossed over on board *Jin Long Fa*. They were also less paid, about US\$120 a month. On board *Ta Fu 3*, the pecking order, however, was different because the more experienced hands were the Chinese and the Filipinos were the ones who were bossed over! This was in spite of the fact that the Chinese were earning less than the Filipinos. There were occasional brawls between the two nationalities, which they attributed to “small misunderstandings”.

The vessel would carry about 50 tonnes of mackerel and 30 tonnes of squid as bait, either in fresh or frozen form. (The mackerel would be in 10-kg cartons, and the squid in 15-kg cartons). The baiting was done according to the instructions of the captain and was implemented by the boson. Both mackerel and squid were simultaneously baited and the order of baiting would depend on the captain. Sometimes, it would be two hooks in a row with mackerel, followed by two with squid. Or it would be two with mackerel, followed by four with squid.

Time at sea

The fishing was either in the cold waters south of Australia or in the warm waters off Somalia. *Ta Fu 3* would also fish off Oman. Most often, before *Ta Fu 3* returned to Taiwan, both vessels would be fishing more or less in the same waters. The time spent at sea would vary from four to seven months, depending on cold

or warm waters. In warm waters, the 50-m vessel would carry about 3,000 hooks, and, in colder waters, about 3,600.

The cold waters were more difficult for fishing because the sea would be rough and there would be more fish to catch, which meant a lot more of work. The main species caught in the colder waters were bigeye tuna. In warm waters, albacore, blue marlin, and swordfish were the main species caught.

Normally, fishing trips to warmer waters were longer. At least every 60 days, the catch would be transferred mid-sea to another reefer ship. Re-fuelling was done at sea in warm waters, about twice every six to seven months. In cold waters, re-fuelling was not done because of the rough sea. There were times when the crew had to work continuously for two days at a stretch, but such instances were rare. If the catch was poor, they got more time to rest. There was more work (and fish!) and less sleep in the colder waters. After each fishing trip, the vessel with the crew would spend about a month in Mauritius.

On completion of the contract, the Filipinos wanted to collect their salaries for three years and get back home. When they approached the captain, they were informed their salaries had been paid to the agent in Singapore. But on contacting the agent, they learnt that the master

(owner of the vessel) had paid no money! On advice from an anonymous well-wisher, who works at the agent's office in Singapore, they sought the help of the *Apostolat de la Mer*, Port Louis, Mauritius, on 11 May 2000.

They had no complaints about the working conditions on board the fishing vessel. The food was good and sufficient. They got rice gruel for breakfast with fried fish or fried peanuts. For lunch and dinner, they were served fish, chicken, vegetables and rice. In fact, every six hours, food was served. The fourth meal, however, would be light. The timing of the meals depended on when the fishing operations for the day would begin. If it started at 3 a.m., food, in the form of light refreshments, would be served at 6 a.m. and proper breakfast at 9 a.m.

Aboard *Jin Long Fa*, the crew was divided into three groups (say, A, B and C). Each of these groups had two Filipinos. Ramos, the seventh Filipino, was always in charge of the fish hold. The composition of the groups was not changed during their tenure on board. Two groups would work for three hours each, while the third would rest for six hours. The groups took turns so that everybody got an equal chance to rest.

Different grouping

On board *Ta Fu 3*, the group configuration was different. They were divided into two

groups of eight each, and each worked for a shift of seven hours. The third group, comprising four (two Chinese and two Filipinos), were assigned to the freezer, to gut and store fish, unlike in *Jin Long Fa*, where everybody had to do everything, except for Ramos.

The operation of the main line was automated. The captain would instruct the crew to wake him up when the fishing operations commenced. If the fishing day began at 3 a.m., group A crew would throw the baited hooks into the sea for three hours, followed by group B for another three hours. While group A worked, group B could rest and, after their shift to pay the line, Group A could rest for three hours. In the meantime, group C would rest for the entire six hours.

The captain would give his full attention to fishing operations when the lines were being paid out, to make sure that the lines were not getting entangled and also to make sure that there was no obstruction in the form of a boat. Once the line was paid out, there would be an hour's break for breakfast when the three groups would eat together.

The first part of the job was over. The second part then began, which took longer, about 18 hours. The operation has a cycle: work-standby-rest-work or rest-standby-work-rest. At a given point in time, there will be 15 workers on the deck, six retrieving the line, and nine standing by.

The first shift after paying the line is for three hours, say, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., and the subsequent ones for a period of two- to two-and-a-half-hours. The first shift is longer because the group has been resting longer hours. Also, during the first shift, the first boson will sleep for the entire duration of three hours. In the retrieving operation, two of the groups are further divided into two, say A1, A2, and B1, B2, those who are the standby and those who can rest. The group that could sleep for six hours remains as an undivided group.

After breakfast, at 10 a.m., group C, which had been resting for six hours, will start retrieving the line. A2 and B (both B1, B2) will be the standby, while A1 would be

given rest. The standby can not rest. From 1 p.m. to 3 p.m., while B (both B1, B2) retrieves the line, A1 and C will be the standby, and A2 will be given rest. From 3 p.m. to 5 p.m., group A (both A1, A2) will retrieve the line, while B2 is the standby and C and B1 would rest. From 5 p.m. to 5.30 p.m. is the break for refreshments. From 5.30 p.m. to 7.30 or 8 p.m., while C works, A (both A1, A2) and B1 would be the standby, and B2 would rest. From 8 p.m. to 10 p.m., while B (both B1, B2) works, C will be the standby together with A2, and A1 will be given rest. From 10 p.m. to midnight, A (both A1, A2) will work, B (both B1, B2) will be the standby and C will rest. From 12.30 p.m. to 1 a.m. there is another break for refreshments. From 1 a.m. to 3 a.m., C will work. B (both B1, B2) and A2 will be standby and A1 will be given rest. And the new cycle would start from 3 a.m. This time it is the turn of B to sleep six hours. At least once in three days, each of the group got a six-hour rest.

All the crew had individual beds with mattresses. There was also an electric fan. In cold waters, warm clothing was provided. The only hazard that they encountered during the trip was with hooks occasionally getting caught in their fingers, for which the captain would administer medication.

If there was no fish or if there were many dolphins in the fishing ground, the captain will move to a new ground, as dolphins eat up most of the fish. The workers would then get a break of two to five hours, the cruising time between the two fishing grounds. However, they were not permitted to sleep during this time.

The Filipinos enjoyed their time on board the fishing vessel. Asked to comment on what they liked about working on board a fishing vessel, they said, "We enjoyed the bonhomie on board, especially when there was no fish to be caught!"

Contacts established

The *Apostolat de La Mer* has established contact with Lee First Marine, the ship agent in Mauritius, and negotiations were undertaken. Contacts were also established with Victor Lim of the Step-up Marine Enterprise in Singapore. The fishermen left Mauritius for the Philippines on Sunday, 21 May. Ramos



was paid for the entire period of his contract. The others, who spent two years on board *Ta Fu 3*, got only one year's salary, the period for which they had worked on board *Jin Long Fa*. They were not paid for the period they had worked on board *Ta Fu 3*. Aladdin Villacorti, the Ambassador of the Philippines in South Africa, who is responsible for Mauritius, has promised to mediate and to ensure, through the Philippine Embassy in Singapore, that the full salaries will be paid. The Filipinos are also yet to get certificates that they have worked on board a fishing vessel for three years, an important requirement to join the merchant ships. Meanwhile, the seaman's jobs and the tractors of their dreams will have to wait as well. ¶

This article by Sebastian Mathew (icsf@vsnl.com), Executive Secretary of ICSF, is based on interviews with the Filipino workers in Mauritius