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Fleeing for elusive fortune

Over 3000 Bangladeshi seafarers deserted vessels at foreign ports in 30 years



Seamen's Training Centre

SHAHIDUL ISLAM, Chittagong

A total of 3346 Bangladeshi seafarers had deserted their vessels while anchored at foreign ports in last 30 years till October 2001,official reports said.

A section of Bangladeshi seafarers desert their ships at foreign ports to make their fortune leaving negative impact on the country's image. "It has become a common craze among some of our seamen who dared to sneak into foreign countries while the ships anchor there", sources in the shipping circle here said.

The desertion by Bangladeshi seafarers was found both from home flag vessels and foreign ships and most of them landed in America and European countries.

For this, the ship owners not only fell in embarrassing situation rather faced huge financial loss, shipping sector sources said.

According to statistics available here: 87 Bangladeshi seafarers fled from vessels in foreign ports in 1972, 94 in 1973, 112 in 1974, 148 in 1975, 170 in 1976, 100 in 1977, 66 in 1978, 132 in 1979, 106 in 1980, 137 in 1981, 95 in 1982, 91 in 1983, 190 in 1984, 151 in 1985, 271 in 1986, 102 in 1987, 214 in 1988, 183 in 1989, 129 in 1990, 147 in 1991, 108 in 1992, 71 in 1993, 77 in 1994,

94 in 1995, 50 in 1996, 77 in 1997, 36 in 1998, 34 in 1999, 33 in 2000 and 41 in 2001.

Sources said, unattractive working condition on board the vessels, poor wages, irregularities in employment and the lack of prospects of the sea career, mostly forced them to land in foreign lands.

"Irregular employment conditions, specially long delays between each turn of employment was perceived to be the main cause of desertion of our seamen," said a source. "The structure and level of salary scale and the rank and dignity crises were also other motivation forces for desertion."

Meanwhile, the speakers at a function last month here on the occasion of Maritime Exhibition-2002 expressed grave concern over such a trend of desertion by Bangladeshi seafarers and urged the authorities concerned for taking pragmatic steps to stop the practice. Minister for Shipping Lt. Col. Akbar Hossain Bir Pratik (Retd) who inaugurated this exhibition, jointly organised by the Seamen's Training Centre (STC) and Chittagong Port Authority (CPA), announced that the government was contemplating formulation of a tough law to check the menace of desertion.

"The trend of jumping in foreign

ports from the vessels by our seamen is really damaging our image abroad and reducing employment opportunities of Bangladeshi seafarers in foreign vessels", he said.

The two-day exhibition, first of its kind in Bangladesh, was aimed at promoting employment opportunities for Bangladeshi seamen at home and abroad.

A total of 22 stalls including CPA, Mongla Port Authority, Merchantile Marine Department and Bangladesh Shipping Corporation (BSC) participated in the exhibition.

The Seamen's Training Centre (STC) located at South Halishahar in Chittagong provides unique opportunity for Bangladeshi youths to be employed in vessels of both national and foreign flag carriers taking voyage to various ports of the world regularly.

The STC presently is conducting courses on two main academic disciplines – Nautical and Engineering – under the supervision of Nautical Department. There are two sub-departments of 'Catering' and 'Physical training.'

The STC is conducting pre-sea training for ships' ratings (Deck Engine Saloon). Special emphasis is given to spoken English to prepare them for global market.

Besides, many other short mandatory ancillary courses for both officers and crew are being conducted as per International Convention on STCW 95, which are:-

1. Personal Safety and Social Responsibilities (PSSR)
2. Certificate of Proficiency in Survival Craft and Rescue Boat (CPSC and RB)
3. Elementary First Aid (EFA)
4. Fire Prevention and Fire Fighting (FPFF)
5. Personal Survival Technique (PST)
6. Efficient Deck Hand (EDH)
7. Tanker Familiarisation (TF)
8. Oil Tanker Familiarisation (OTF).

The STC initially started functioning as a small institute at Gosaidanga, Chittagong in 1952. Now it is one of the modern institute of its kind in the region and occupied a large area along with modern training blocks. The STC was permanently established at its present location on December 4 in 1989.

Being trained up at this institute, registered seafarers of various ratings with the Government Shipping Office as on October 2001 stood at 4533.

Making Chittagong a mega city is my dream: Mohiuddin

NURUL ALAM, Chittagong

Chittagong City Corporation (CCC) Mayor A B M Mohiuddin Chowdhury said I dreamt of turning Chittagong into a full-fledged mega city by providing all civic amenities and facilities to its residents.

"I want to take measures in phases to materialise my dream". He said this while he was talking to The Daily Star on Monday. Mohiuddin Chowdhury, into his second term as CCC mayor, said Chittagong being the economic nerve centre of the country should be made a self-sufficient mega city with planned development.

"Chittagong is really a potential place for economic development of the country and our national interest is related with its development", he added.

"So everybody must realise it with importance from economic point of view", he said.

Chowdhury said that as a mayor he had taken different plans to spearhead its overall development. "We have given priority to education as we need skilled and talented experts in our development efforts for this city. We need expert planner here to ensure a total development of the port city", CCC mayor said adding that "that is why we have taken steps to open a university under the city corporation". "Earlier, we were used to be called sons of sawdagar (businessmen) here as people of Chittagong mostly had shortage of qualification", he said.

"If we can develop the education sector by opening a university, it would obviously be helpful for our national development", he added. The CCC has identified the health as another important sector and engaged 130 doctors in the city to provide medical services. Under CCC five maternity centres, 41 primary health cares and a gynae training centre are presently functioning to provide treatment facilities,

ties, the mayor said.

Turning to other development works done by Chittagong City Corporation, the mayor said, "we have introduced some income generating projects by utilising our own potentialities as all development works can not be done only depending on government budget", he said. "I believe we should run the development projects by tapping our own potentialities," he said. "Besides, I have given special attention to keep the city neat and clean and the people of Chittagong should judge it", the mayor claimed. "Moreover, we have ideas to build a marine drive highway stretching from Fauzderhat to Kalurghat to facilitate the communication here and to develop a garments village on the outskirts of the city to generate huge economic activities in this port city", the mayor said.

The CCC mayor also said "I am now thinking of a project for preserving rainwater at hill valleys with the



Mohiuddin Chowdhury

help of plastic pasting process to resolve the water crisis in this port city. Already we have completed a topographical survey on this idea of preserving rainwater and we are now consulting the experts about its feasibility", he said.

"It is my idea, if we can do it, we can easily supply water through purification process to the residents as well as to foreign vessels calling at Chittagong port for earning foreign currency", the mayor beamed. The mayor, however, suggested for developing a harbour at Sandwip channel to accommodate large number of ships to reduce pressure on Chittagong port.

Replying to a question about the installation of proposed private container port by the American company Stevedoreing Services of America (SSA) the mayor categorically said "I already stood against it and I would continue to oppose the same". "The SSA has taken this project to set up a container port at the estuary of the river Karnaphuli to destroy Chittagong port and to cripple economy of Bangladesh", he said.



Tribal women on their way to work in Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Photo:Star

Piracy at sea: A menace to global shipping

Piracy is the act of boarding any vessel with the intent to commit theft or other crime and with the capability to use force in the furtherance of the act.

Very sadly, violent attacks against shipping and seafarers by pirates and armed robbers continue to be a major problem, with many innocent seafarers being murdered or seriously injured in the process.

Piracy is only one day younger than sea-borne trade. From the extant records it may be seen that as long as man has been at sea, there have been those who would rob him.

Recent years have seen an upsurge in piracy in many forms and in many parts of the world. It has aroused much concern within the shipping industry.

Classical piracy as an act committed on the high seas is fewer in the world today. The present day piracy is committed within the territorial waters of a sovereign state. This may well be defined as piracy by the coastal state concerned. Piracy can occur when a vessel is berthed alongside, within a port, at anchor and even when under way.

The International Maritime Bureau (IMB) reports that the number of reported attacks on vessels has continued to increase from 187 in 1998 to 203 in 1999. The waters and ports of South East Asia, especially Malacca Strait, Phillip Channel, South China Sea remain the most dangerous areas for shipping industry accounting for over half of all the reported attacks.

Brazil, which posed a great threat to shipping due to piracy till mid 1999, shows some encouraging signs that the local authorities are starting to address the problem of attacks in Brazilian ports with determination and thus reduced the frequency of attacks. But these days in Bangladesh armed attacks have continued posing significant hazard to shipping industry.

In 1999, in the Bay of Bengal, a comparatively small area than Indonesian waters, a total of 23 actual and attempted pirate attacks on ships were reported and in the first 9 months in 2000, a total of 32 cases were reported.

The sea coasts of Bangladesh extend over 700 kilometres in the Bay of Bengal. The area of EEZ (exclusive economic zone) is

approximately 40,000 sq miles. Over 1500 sea going vessels visit Bangladesh ports a year. There are 200 coastal ships, 70 fishing trawlers and over 2000 cargo boats and 6000 fishing boats plying through the EEZ.

The maritime industry is rightly outraged at this continuing situation and time has come for something effective to be done to bring law and order back to the sea.

RECOMMENDATIONS :

- 1) Bangladesh Coast Guard be given the responsibility to curb piracy. However, for this they need to be properly manned and equipped.
- 2) The responsibilities of the Coast Guard include:
 - a) Search and rescue.
 - b) Anti-piracy activities.
 - c) Anti-smuggling activities.
 - d) Rendering assistance to disabled ships.
 - e) Fishery protection.
 - f) Protection of EEZ etc.

Item : (a), (b) and (d) are activities related to merchant ships. Presently all the Coast Guard personnel are from the Navy. For proper and fruitful search and rescue, rendering assistance to disabled ships, anti-piracy activities, the Coast Guard should recruit personnel from merchant shipping background. If necessary, the Coast Guard recruitment rules may be amended as necessary. The idea is to make the Cost Guard more dynamic and more efficient and effective.

3) However, the Coast Guard being new induction is seriously handicapped because of improper patrol craft and other equipment. The Bangladesh Navy should carry out the anti-piracy activities until the Coast Guard is ready to take over fully.

4) About 80 per cent of piracy incidents in Chittagong and Mongla ports are related to the stealing of mooring ropes, breaking of containers, equipment loaded barges anchored at Chittagong-Mongla route. In most cases they move with small powered boats. Hence movement restrictions after dark imposed on them might bring some good results.

5) The remaining 20 per cent of the piracy activities take place enroute on slow moving low free-board ships between Cox's Bazar

and Chittagong anchorage and on board oil rigs and their support vessels. This is particularly alarming in the case of large tankers being towed to the Chittagong anchorage for subsequent disposal at the beaching yards. Due to the slow and cumbersome nature of the tow they are attacked and looted by organised gangs. To guard against such activities a well-equipped surveillance and reporting station VTRS (Voluntary Traffic Reporting System) may be established at Cox's Bazar and a second station at Patenga. A complete ship tracking system should be available at these stations as well as powerful patrol boats for immediate despatch.

6) A Coast Guard or Navy patrol boat be stationed at the anchorage area round the clock.

7) The Naval Station at Mongla to be provided with fast moving shallow draft boats which can chase pirates even in the small canals and tributaries of the Pussur river.

8) Required legal authority to arrest and fire (shoot) be given to them.

9) At the time of pirate attack, the only people who can help mariners are mariners themselves. All possible precautions that a merchant vessel can take should be taken, besides

! Keeping an all round efficient lookout, particularly a stern watch should be maintained and no country boats should be allowed to come alongside while at anchor and enroute. It must be remembered that the best form of deterrent is crew awareness. If they can detect a boat approaching and apprehend in time piracy incidents would certainly decrease.

! Deck security watch to be maintained.

! A good radar watch for boats approaching the vessel.

! All doors leading to accommodation from deck to be locked from inside.

! At night poop deck lights should be on.

10) Ship Masters approaching Chittagong and Mongla be warned via surveillance stations. However, till such time these stations are established, the Port Radio Control may be given this task. A separate VHF Channel and a dedicated set of people be appointed for this

purpose.

11) To grow national awareness anti-piracy seminars and workshops may be arranged at regular intervals involving ship-owners, shipping agents and ship officers.

12) To bring long-term and lasting benefits the Maritime Education Centres of the country should provide anti-piracy training and education.

13) Establishment of GMDSS coast stations at Chittagong and Mongla with at least VHF Dsc and MF Dsc facilities.

In the event, when potential attackers are identified, there should be much activity on the vessel like:

- a) Searchlights used to dazzle the approaching boat.
- b) Sirens should be sounded.
- c) Ready-rigged fire hoses could be used.
- d) Use of distress flares.
- e) People (crew) should be made to run around the deck creating panic to pirates.

CONCLUSIONS :

Piracy, as defined, is deeply rooted in some areas. It flourishes and will continue to be so where there is an abundance of targets and where law enforcement, for any reason, is inadequate or ineffective.

The industry can and should do more both to improve prevention and response techniques. They should also ensure that the crew on their vessels in risk areas should be advised, educated or trained both in the techniques of prevention and in the proper behaviour during an attack.

All incidents should be reported to the ICC-International Maritime Bureau who will regularly collate this material, and disseminate to all interested parties. Law enforcement agencies should ensure that appropriate priority is given to piracy or armed robbery attacks which occur within the areas of their jurisdiction. They should, in spite of acknowledged difficulties, ensure the closest possible co-operation with one another and with the industry.

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PHOTO: A.K.M MOHSIN

The scenic splendours of the lake surrounded by hills near the Bhatiari Cantonment in Chittagong makes it an attractive tourist spot. Some innovative entrepreneurs seized the opportunity to earn money by offering speedboat services to tourists.