



THE SHIP CALLING FOR A CREW CHANGE MAY INVOLVE ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS

The Club first issued a circular as long ago as 1989 on the subject of ship agents being used by unscrupulous migrant smugglers to move illegal immigrants around the world. In the past five years ITIC has received more than thirty notifications of approaches to ship agents. The last three editions of the Club's newsletter, *The Intermediary*, have contained articles and warnings about this problem, but in spite of this the Club continues to receive notifications from Members who have become victims.

Who are the migrant smugglers?

Although the approaches to ship agents have come from many countries, there are two main migrant smugglers who involve ship agents in their illegal immigration scam. One is a company in Piraeus, Greece which usually uses a false name for both the company and the ship (although from time to time a genuine ship name is used). This migrant smuggler uses faxes which are badly presented and spelt and uses cellphone numbers (or even satellite phones). The fax numbers are often public access faxes. The other describes itself as a ship owner/ship manager/crew manager in Chittagong, Bangladesh, usually communicates by e-mail and often uses the name of a ship which has recently been sold or scrapped. As shipowners are unlikely to make an expensive port call just to take on crew, both smugglers notify the agent of a call at the port for bunkers and crew change.

What do they ask the agent to do?

The request from the migrant smugglers is usually for the ship agent to address a letter to his country's embassy in a third world country requesting visas for a number of seamen (usually 8 or 9 - but there have been as many as 15) who are travelling to the agent's country to join a ship. Alternatively the agent is asked to notify an airline that it is "OK" for the "crew" to board a particular flight. Once the agent has complied with this request, he is asked to meet the crew at the airport and take them to a hotel to await the arrival of the ship, which is expected within days.

What happens?

The "crew" arrive but the "ship" does not. If the "crew" have arrived at their final destination, they will disappear either from the airport or soon after they are taken to their hotel. If they arrive at an intermediate place, they remain in the country allegedly waiting for the "ship" to arrive. The smugglers think nothing of duping the migrants by taking their money and leaving them stranded in a country which is not their destination. The result is that the ship agent may be left with up to 15 people to maintain in hotels and to repatriate. In addition, he may face substantial fines from his local immigration authorities.

Who is at risk?

Some agents may read this and feel that they are not at risk. However, agents in every country need to be vigilant – in addition to obvious destinations for illegal immigrants, such as North America, Europe, and Australasia, the Club has had reports of “crew” left stranded in China, South America, the Middle East and several African countries.

What should the agent do?

Ship agents should be conscious that this is an ongoing problem and view all requests for crew changes which involve third world crew with suspicion. If they are asked to deal with the call of a ship at their port for the purpose of bunkers and a crew change they should contact ITIC immediately so that the Club can check the veracity of the request.

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