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Tuvaluans reveal how prayers got them through piracy hell



Glad to be alive....some of the Tuvalu sailors were held hostage by Somali pirates

When Jack Mataiatauleka had an AK47 aimed at his temple, he knew he was not the only one that was staring death in the face.

It was a fate that was most likely to befall the other 23 members of the ship's crew, but high seas piracy would also threaten a core of his island nation's sources of revenue: remittances.

Figures collated by the Pacific office of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) estimate that Mataiatauleka's home nation of Tuvalu benefits from A\$4 million a year from remittances. That is around 10 to 14% of Tuvalu's Gross Domestic Product.

The ADB estimates that in one given year, there are around 300 to 400 Tuvaluans like Mataiatauleka who crew ships around the world.

In a year that had seen almost 10 to 15% of the value of its trust fund lost through the collapse of the international stock markets brought about by the global financial crisis, the tiny island nation could ill-afford any loss in remittances.

Already, ADB is flashing warning lights on the Tuvalu Government's high spending habits and is calling for cost containment especially in the wages of government workers.

Public spending needs to be reduced to compensate for the loss in value of its trust fund, said

ADB.

“Supported by a 9.8% increase in government expenditure in 2008, the economy grew by an estimated 1.5%,” said the ADB’s Outlook report for 2009. “Outlays rose for public sector staffing, goods and services, and grants and subsidies.

“However, plans to boost capital spending were not realised mainly because income from grants fell well short of expectations.

“The overall fiscal position eroded when a medical treatment plan cost four times the budgeted amount and the subsidy for the electricity utility was nearly double the budget allocation, a result of higher costs of imported fuel. The recurrent fiscal deficit was around 0.4% of GDP.”

In an island nation where paid employment is scarce, it is however highly unlikely that high seas piracy will deter Tuvalu seamen from crewing overseas going ships.

Tuvalu’s transport minister, Taukelina Finikaso, is acutely aware of this saying remittances from seafarers is an important foreign exchange earner for his country.

“It brings back in a year close to the region of US\$2 million or in excess of that,” Finikaso told ISLANDS BUSINESS in an interview at the Tuvalu High Commission in Suva last month.

“And these are the kinds of money that actually goes down to the grassroots. To the families in Tuvalu, if they have one of the young men working overseas, these young men look after a lot of things.

“They pay school fees for their children and those in the extended families. They do a lot of things for their families in Tuvalu.”

Ordeal: He agreed there’s little his government could do in protecting sailors from pirates in Africa. But he hopes no Tuvalu seamen would have to go through the same traumatic experience.

For Mataiatauleka, the timing of the ordeal could not have come at a bad time.

He had an 11-month work contract with the owners of the ship, and he was onto his final month when the Somali pirates struck.

There were 24 crew members of the Hansa Stavanger, and he was one of 12 Tuvaluans manning the German-owned ship. Also among the crew were two Fijians and Filipinos.

“It was around 9.15 in the morning and we were working on the deck when we suddenly heard one loud blast,” said Mataiatauleka.

“A 60-horsepower fibreglass punt with five armed pirates of the high seas started shooting at us.

“Then we heard the sound of the bell and every seaman knows what that means—we were either under attack or in trouble or a fire had started, so there is one point on the ship we all had to meet.

“Each sailor has a duty to perform in those situations and my job was to man the wheel. All the crew ran to this one room. I was the only Tuvaluan on the bridge.”

The ship’s captain, Krzysztof Kotiuk, a German, his second officer, another German, and a third officer from Ukraine, were also on the bridge with Mataiatauleka.

“We were under fire from AK47 weapons and they were shooting at us at the bridge,” he said.

“They fired at us first on the starboard (right) side, then after that they switched around and shot at us from portside.

“Then they hit us with a grenade launcher which penetrated the thick steel walls of the ship.

“That part of the ship caught fire which was when the captain gave the orders to slow down the vessel.”

As the shooting continued, the sailors crawled around the bridge, sometimes trying to sneak a peek through the window.

“It did not take an hour for the pirates to carry out their operation. They were so fast and well trained to do that stuff.

“They knew what they wanted to do. There was no doubt about that.”

Mataiataleka said the crew surrendered to the pirates after putting out the fire.

They were told to lie down with their hands on their heads and with AK47s pointed at them.

“While we were extinguishing the fire, we did not know what to do,” he said.

“We were so confused. It was not only the fire that affected us, but more so the weapons that were being pointed at us.

“The captain made sure we put the fire out first before we returned to our position of submission as hostages.

“That really took a lot out of us and we ended up exhausted and battered.

“Even the captain did not want us to risk our lives trying to overpower the pirates, so we stood back and did what we were told.”

The Tuvalu sailor was reliving their ordeal off the coast of Somalia in Africa when their 10,000-tonne container ship was seized by pirates on April 4, this year.

Terror: Negotiations for the freighter’s release and that of its German captain and its 23 member crew that included Mataiataleka lasted four months.

They were only released on August 3 after the shipowner, Leonhardt & Blumberg of Hamburg, of Germany, paid the Somali pirates a ransom of US\$2.75 million. The sum was a far cry from the US\$15 million the pirates had initially demanded.

There was no way the tiny island of Tuvalu would have been able to pay the ransom, so the onus fell on the owners of Hansa Stavanger to enter into negotiations with the pirates.

Five days after their release, the story of the crew’s plight was described in harrowing details by the European magazine Spiegel.

The terror, the magazine said, began with a dot on the ship’s radar in the morning of April 4.

“A tiny boat was approaching the ship head-on.

“It was still 400 miles away, but it was travelling at high speed.

“Seeing such a small boat 400 miles away from the mainland, Frederik Euskirchen knew right away that the men in the craft were not out fishing.

“Euskirchen, the second officer on the Hansa Stavanger, was working on the bridge at the time.

“He is only 26, but he has a cool head despite his youth.

“Euskirchen received his training at the marine college in Elsfleth in northern Germany, which has one of the best nautical programmes worldwide.

“All he needs to work as a captain is another year-and-a-half of experience on board a ship.

“As the boat approached, the men on the bridge immediately called the captain. Krzysztof Kotiuk, 62, a German seaman of Polish extraction, was sitting in his cabin doing the monthly accounts.

“He hurried to the bridge.

“The Hansa Stavanger veered sharply to the side and reversed course, its two-stroke diesel engine operating at full power, just as planned.

“But even at its top speed of 17 knots, the freighter was too slow to outrun the pirate boat.

“We tried to get away. But it was impossible,” the captain would later say. “Their boat was so fast that they caught up with us within 20 minutes.”

“There were only five gaunt figures squatting in the boat, their traditional Somali clothing fluttering in the wind.

“They began shooting immediately. The bullets from their Kalashnikovs whipped across the deck, followed by the hiss of rocket-propelled grenades.

“A grenade hit the captain’s cabin and a fire broke out, which it took the crew six hours to extinguish.

“The pirates quickly gained control over the ship when Kotiuk’s officers decided not to do anything heroic and stopped making risky, evasive manoeuvres.

“The pirates calmly climbed on board. None of the Somalis spoke English.

“They were the attackers, the ones who were best at climbing and shooting; the brains of the operation would arrive later.

“Nevertheless, using their hands and feet, the nautical maps on the bridge and a piece of paper, the pirates quickly made it clear to the officers where they wanted the ship to go: to Harardhere, one of the three most notorious pirate hideouts on Somalia’s east coast.

“When the freighter was later anchored near Harardhere, small motorboats shuttled back and forth between the beach and the ship, bringing reinforcements.

“According to Kotiuk, “there were always 10 to 12 people on the bridge, and about six people on the deck.

“There were also guards posted on the deck.”

“The captain estimates that about 30 heavily armed pirates were on the ship at any given time to guard their prize.

“Everything seemed tolerable at first.

“On April 6, the captain used the ship’s satellite telephone to send the following message to his wife Bozena in Munich: “We have been kidnapped. The kidnappers are high, but friendly. Don’t worry, we’re waiting for the ransom.”

“The pirates rounded up the sailors at night. The Europeans were locked up in the heavily guarded bridge, while the sailors from the Philippines and the Polynesian island nation of Tuvalu were placed in a room in the hold.

“The pirates slept in the cabins. They also stole all the sailors’ belongings.”

For Mataiatauleka and his fellow Tuvalu sailors, the nightmare was to be 120 long days in hell.

It was particularly hard for him, having been a national representative in boxing for Tuvalu in the South Pacific Games.

But it was the thought of seeing his 16-month old daughter Illiack and his wife Emily that refrained him from taking any rash decisions.

Agonising: “It was an agonising four months as a hostage. I was thinking of taking over the ship—who the hell are these guys—they’re too small.

“I was thinking about taking all five of them (pirates) at one time.

“The difference was the weapons—if I made the move may be someone would suffer as a result, so I did not want to put anyone at risk.

“The Fiji boys were ready to go on the attack but the captain told us to stay back.

“One of the Fijians was dying for a fight but the captain stopped us. Who knows—maybe the pirates wanted to survive too because their country is facing their own problems.

“From afar they looked like 10 or 11 years old, but close up, they looked 40 or 50 years old.

“They are part of a group and in Somali they fight in tribes and that is how these pirates work.”

“I almost started a fight—but my friends cooled me down.

“I am a Christian and I have faith in the Lord,” the London Missionary Society church-member said.

“Fortunately, we were not hurt physically but mentally we were really affected—most of us have been at sea for a long time.

“I know my family is still trying to come to terms with what happened.

“During this past four months, my wife went through hell—we may have to talk things over when I get back.

“Almost all of us were in shock—we could not understand what the pirates were saying and there were some days when we just wanted to do something to the pirates to end the terror.

“When I think about it, I feel like it was unreal—but the rest of the crew were all strong and we encouraged each other no matter what. As long as we saw each other on the ship, our spirit would be lifted.

“We prayed a lot and as soon as we said ‘amen’ a new prayer would start...that was the only

thing we could do...to rely on divine intervention to get us out.”

Unbeknown to Mataiataleka and the rest of the crew of Hansa Stavanger, the German Government was plotting their release using a team of its elite armed police strike back team. Details of the mission were only made public by Spiegel magazine after the ransom was paid and the men were released.

It was to be one of the biggest secret operations in post-war German history, the magazine said, involving Navy frogmen and a modern submarine.

“The crisis team in Berlin had mobilised 200 members of the GSG-9 elite police unit, which had brought along helicopters and speedboats.

“The men were now on board a borrowed American helicopter carrier, the USS Boxer, waiting for orders to deploy.

“A state-of-the-art German submarine had also been requested.

“A senior official at the German Interior Ministry, who was involved in the planning, would later say there were two scenarios.

“Under Plan A, the submarine was to take the men to the container ship, where they would exit the submarine through the torpedo tubes, wearing diving gear, climb up the side of the freighter and then overpower the pirates.

“The tried and tested method had the advantage of causing little noise and being relatively safe for the GSG-9 men involved.

“Under Plan B, however, the GSG-9 men would be brought in by helicopter and lower themselves onto the ship’s deck using ropes.

“Helicopters are loud, and the pirates could have shot down one of the helicopters with their bazookas or killed the hostages.

“Plan B was clearly the riskier approach.

“But Plan A failed to materialise, because the submarine was still too far away, and so it remained where it was docked, at a port on the Mediterranean island of Crete. That left Plan B.

“Officials at the German federal police headquarters in Potsdam, outside Berlin, were opposed to the idea.

“So were the Americans, who were unwilling to offer up the USS Boxer for what could turn out to be a suicide mission.”

It was clear from the Spiegel story that the five German officers aboard the Hansa Stavanger were the prized possessions of the Somali pirates.

The Tuvalu crew members for instance never spoke of intimidating tactics, nor of being forcibly removed from the ship.

Four officers spent sometime on land with the pirates, while the ship captain was dragged onto the ship deck for mock assassination games with their captors.

Only that in those two instances, Captain Kotiuk didn’t know the pirates were merely playing games.

They would hold a pistol to his head and attempt to press the trigger, the captain later said.

Negotiations: On another occasion when an American helicopter circled the Hansa Stavanger, the pirates forced the crew to line up along the ship’s side before they hid behind them.

The crew members were being used as human shields, the captain told Spiegel magazine.

As negotiations dragged on, food supply dwindled aboard the ship.

Pirates began to haul in goats from ashore and the animals were slaughtered on the ship’s deck almost everyday.

Crew members also began to spend the better part of the day fishing for their meals.

Water supply began to dry up too and for the crew’s engineers, the need for some ingenuity was called for.

The supply of drinking water was also running low because the ship’s desalination plant was shut down while the ship was at anchor, explained Spiegel.

“The ship’s engineers took apart the air-conditioning system and modified the condenser so that the condensation water could be captured and used as drinking water.”

Despite the harrowing experience, seamen like Mataiatauleka have limited choice when it comes to employment. Surrounded by the sea in coral atolls that are barely above the sea, men like him are natural seamen.

“For us seafarers, it would be hard to find another job because we do it well.

“When Tuvaluan sailors are frequently at sea, it means our reputation is good and our services are sought after.

“Us Pacific Islanders live by the sea and it gives us our survival as seafarers and sailors—as sailors the ship and the sea is the sailor’s grave and that is where we die.

“Every time we take a vacation, we look at the sea and it tells us to come back.

“If we die at sea, we die a dream death—but not under these circumstances at the hands of pirates.

“At sea, there are so many dangers and every day we see life and death pass in front of us—high waves, shifting containers, engine breakdown, anything can happen that can take your life.”

He is thankful that people prayed for their release and for the pressure their government and other Pacific islands governments applied that led to the shipping company paying the ransom and paved the way for their release.

“At times of crisis we all come together and I thank everyone in the Pacific for their kind prayers,” he said.

August 3 is now etched forever in their minds, as it was the day that they saw a small Cessna plane flew over the Hansa Stavanger and dropped little parachute bags containing the ransom of US\$2.75 million in cash.

The pirates made a quick exit soon after and escorted by two German frigates, the ship headed for the Kenyan port city of Mombasa.

There, the crew members were transferred to one of the German warships for medical examination.

After the reviews, Mataiatauleka said they were treated like VIPs and were free to do anything on the ship.

“We give our thanks to them also,” he said.

The Pacific crew members flew out of Kenya days later and arrived in Nadi on 12 August.

“Once the Fiji immigration officers saw us, they told us that we are all Fijians and they gave us special treatment.

“In the past, they would ask us how long we were staying.

“This time, it was different; they asked how long do we want to stay.”

Mataiatauleka and his Tuvalu seafarers spent several more days in Fiji awaiting their flight home.

He was raring to re-unite with his young family and his immediate concerns for now are basic.

“We missed our taro, fish, clams and coconut cream.

“I have telephoned my wife and cousins to get these for my first Tuvalu meal.

“Ever since our release, I have begun to regain my appetite.”