

Pinoy seafarers in limbo aboard a vessel in Philly

Written by Administrator

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The Nikol H at anchor in the Delaware River since April.

The Philippine Consulate General in New York is working to get shore leave for 17 Filipino seafarers whose Greek-owned cargo ship has been stranded for four months now in Delaware River in South Philadelphia due to mechanical and financial problems.

The Consulate released a statement last Wednesday saying the men are in good spirits and receiving pay despite not being allowed off the vessel.

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The 700-foot-cargo ship, Nikol H, unloaded its cargo of cocoa beans in Philadelphia in April.

The Coast Guard ordered it to make repairs before sailing.

However, court documents indicate the vessel's owner, Derma Carriers, hasn't paid for the repairs or wharf fees since docking that has now cost \$1.2 million, which prompted vendors and others to sue to recover costs for providing fuel, food and supplies while the ship has been here.

On May 23, federal authorities detained the ship, including its Egyptian captain and two Ukranian crew members.

U.S. customs officials won't allow seafarers to go ashore without proper visas.

But a spokesman said some Filipino crew members have returned home and been replaced.

Meanwhile, ABS-CBN reported that the Filipino seamen, whose ages ranged from 23 to 54, are asking the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) for humanitarian parole to leave the ship for even for a few hours.

The Seaman's Church Institute, which is also reportedly assisting the seamen to obtain humanitarian parole, has provided the Filipino crews with a cell phone and Internet connection to communicate with their families.

Meanwhile, the ship's fate is tied up in court.

Last week, U.S. District Judge Luis Felipe Restrepo asked lawyers in the case: "Where do we go from here?"

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Everybody is “on pins and needles, waiting for something to happen,” Pastor Bill Rex of the Seamen’s Church Institute said.

“The Coast Guard can’t allow the ship to sit indefinitely in the middle of the river without the engine repairs.”

During recent storms, the Nikol may have slipped its anchor and shifted toward Camden.

“If there are problems with the engines, then there are problems righting the ship,” Rex said.

Recently, there has been an attempt to sell the ship and pay the vendors but, so far, that hasn’t happened, Rex said.

“If no buyer comes soon, once the ship goes to berth for repairs, it likely may be auctioned.”

The financial plight of the Nikol H “is another chapter of what’s happening in the shipping industry,” Alfred Kuffler, the maritime lawyer, said outside court.