

CRUEL TAIWAN

Pierre Gillet

“Working on a Taiwanese tuna boat is like being in prison,” says deliberately Alberto de Ledn, a 34 year-old Filipino from Perez Island. Like thousands of other young Filipinos, his dream was to leave the fishing commonly practiced in his village, which provided him with barely enough to live on, and work “abroad”. With long waiting lists, they had to pay a high price to work. Once on the boats, they were subject to killing work, 12, 19 and sometimes 21 hours nonstop, in a sometimes two years trip. A hellhole for miserable pay. Their contract said that after six months they would receive 30,000 pesos (around US\$1,000) and a percentage of the take for overtime. The contract seemed to be in order, but in the case of Alberto and the others, the crew was robbed when they got back to shore, receiving only 18,000 pesos (US\$600). When they demanded full pay from the agent who recruited them (and had signed their contract), he sued them, knowing full well that these village youth would not get very far with the administration of “justice”.

There are thousands like Alberto and his friends who provide submissive and cheap labor. Taiwanese, Korean and Japanese captains can recruit up to 400/0 of their crews from among foreigners. They do not even bother to divide to conquer. Picking up long lines while keeping up with the winches calls for teamwork and constant concentration. Any slowdown or mishandling of the line is punished with a beating. Nobody even speaks the same language. The Chinese officers cannot even communicate with their Taiwanese crews, who are usually aborigines who speak one of the 17 tribal languages of the island. Therefore they express themselves with their fists and the steel rod, even more so with the Filipinos, Indonesians and Mauritians.

Jean Vacher, from the Island of Mauritius, himself a retired seaman, has documented more than 240 cases of Filipinos beaten or disabled by this barbarian treatment. “The atmosphere’ on board”, he says, “is constantly tense. People don’t understand one another. The different nationalities are suspicious of one another and they are constantly fighting.” In mid-January 1991, one of these battles degenerated into a mutiny. The captain and four Taiwanese were killed on board. Some Filipinos were also killed. The survivors are in prison on the Island of Mauritius.

Mung Ho, a Taiwanese fisherman, also experienced hell. He lost one eye “on the job”, but he received no medical attention or compensation (it was in a fight,

“assured” the insurer). He has no recourse. The Taiwanese government has signed no international convention governing work aboard (e.g. ILO Convention, etc.).

Mung Ho had to go back to work with a glass eye and he dreams like all the deep-sea fishermen that one day he can fish with artisanal fishermen. Unfortunately for him, overfishing and pollution have emptied out the fishing areas and the industrial fleets travel to pirate far-away seas from Chile to Senegal.

These boats are regularly caught flagrantly breaking fishing laws without any authorization. They are intercepted and seized. In Kaohsiung, their main port, they speak of some 3,000 seamen detained abroad. Officers (often ex-military) have gotten out by paying the necessary bail. They abandoned their crews to go home on the first flight available. The ordinary seamen, who are uneducated and speak no English, rot in jail.

In Taiwan itself, a center for fishermen run by the Presbyterian Church has courageously denounced the causes of this drama: the lack of a law to protect fishermen, the deplorable state of safety on board and the repeated violations of human rights. The center estimates that 200 boats have been lost over the last 10 years. According to this same center, the Taiwanese fleet has averaged 24 deaths a month over the last few years. A scandal!

The association of ship-owners in Kaohsiung speaks of a “Welfare Fund” (for whom?). They do not hide the fact that fishing companies are making huge profits. As for violations of human rights, what can they do? “The only language these brutes understand is the fist.”

One would think he is dreaming. Here we are at the end of the 20th century, back to the galleys; rich countries ensuring their supply of cheap labor, mocking the law. The ICSF collective calls for its members and sympathizers to document and denounce these abuses.

After a three-day working meeting in Manilla, support organizations from Taiwan, the Island of Mauritius (the Apostolate of the Sea) and the Philippines are going to coordinate their action.

We would be grateful for any further information sent to the Liaison Office in Brussels or to the office of Samudra.