

Fishermen's fears linger after ordeal

Crew members held hostage by Somali pirates for 19 months finally go home

By AN BAIJIE in Ruzhou, Henan and HU YONGQI in Beijing

To celebrate his homecoming on Wednesday morning, the family of Zhang Leilei followed Chinese tradition by setting off firecrackers. But the sound only reminded the fisherman of gunshots in the pirates' boat, and made him tremble.

The 30-year-old still suffers from the effects of being held hostage by Somali pirates for 19 months in Africa.

The native of Ruzhou, Central China's Henan province, was among 26 crew members on the trawler, *Xu Fu 1*, that was released by Somali pirates on July 17. The Taiwan ship employed 13 fishermen from the mainland, one from Taiwan and 12 from Vietnam.

The ship was hijacked by Somali pirates in late December 2010 while fishing off the coast of Madagascar.

Even though he is now at home, Zhang cannot forget the fear from his ordeal.

"For months, 26 men had to share two kilograms of rice a day," Zhang said. "If the pirates were in a good mood, they would give us some vegetables too."

The pirates liked sweet food with almost no salt, but Zhang didn't want to eat sugar since his teeth were decaying.

"I didn't brush my teeth after I was captured by the pirates, and my teeth became worse," he said.

Zhang and his fellow crew members were also forced to work for the pirates, who made their captives disassemble hijacked ships for the parts, which were then sold. If the pirates detected any idleness, Zhang and the other hostages would be beaten with ropes, knives and the butts of machine guns.

Li Guoqi, 22, Zhang's crewmate, said: "The pirates just beat us at will and they would not consider how we felt at all."

A pirate once slashed Zhang with a knife on his right arm, leaving a 4-cm-long scar.

In the 19 months, Zhang lost 17 kg. He is only 53 kg now.

Some of the hostages were bitten by parasites. Zhang recalls picking out maggotlike parasites off the flesh of several hostages.

Zhang said he usually felt desperate and hopeless — he



Li Guoqi comforts his parents in Pingdingshan, Henan province, on Wednesday. Li and his fellow fishermen were rescued on July 17 after being held hostage by Somali pirates for 19 months.

once wrote a will, and he prepared himself to be killed. But he could not stop thinking of his 6-year-old daughter.

"I could not help crying whenever I saw her photo while I was held in Somalia," Zhang said. "She has changed so much that I didn't recognize her when I came home."

Impossible to escape

Zhang said he never expected danger when he saw the 100,000-ton oil tanker. After the tanker stopped about 10 nautical miles (18.52 km) from the trawler, 20 armed pirates were dropped on a skiff, which then headed at full speed toward Zhang's trawler.

"The skiff reached a speed of nearly 60 knots, but our trawler could do at most 8 knots," Zhang said. "So it was impossible to escape."

As the skiff got closer, Zhang's captain made an emergency call to the trawler's owner for help. The owner said he would seek help from the local government, but the pirates managed to board the trawler before the crew could do anything, Zhang said.

He said it was impossible for them to resist since they had no weapons and they knew nothing about Chinese escort warships.

"Compared with large mer-

chant ships, the trawler *Xu Fu 1* is very small in terms of tonnage and cannot accelerate to full speed in a short time," said Zhang Denghui, an assistant to the president of China Shipping (Group) Co in Shanghai.

"Besides, fishing boats have to stop on one spot waiting for the harvest and cannot escape when encountering pirates on the sea and become more vulnerable to hijacks."

Merchant ships are much safer because of their size and speed. Sailors can find shelter in a "safety cabin" that is equipped with facilities to call for help from the escort navy on nearby waters, or from the China Maritime Search and Rescue Center. Pirates cannot break into the cabin before nearby frigates come to the ship's aid. Unfortunately, *Xu Fu 1* did not have such a cabin.

"I had a machine gun pointed to my forehead by a middle-aged pirate," he recalled. "The only word he shouted to me was 'stop.'"

To frighten the sailors, a pirate fired in the direction of the captain.

The pirates imprisoned the fishermen in a cabin afterward, and the captain was told that they would release the crew after they hijacked other ships. But the pirates did not keep their promise.



One of the rescued fishermen gets a medical check in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, on July 21. Twenty-six crew members were reunited with their families after their long ordeal.

"Once I told my captain that if the pirates decided to kill some of us, please let me and other older people die first. The unmarried men should survive to enjoy life," he said.

The hostages used to think of escape after they were taken to Somalia and imprisoned in October. But 80 pirates blocked the only path out.

Forced to lie

Zhang and his fellows were forced to make calls to their

family to ask for ransom. Pirates usually beat them harder while they made calls to get the sympathy of their families.

Sometimes the prisoners were forced to lie about their situation to their families. Zhang once lied to his mother that his friends' legs had been cut off.

"The pirates would beat us if we refused to tell lies, and we had to put pressure on our families to push them to rescue us as soon as possible," Zhang said. Zhang Qian, Zhang's 56-year-

old mother, passed out on Jan 27 after hearing that her son's nails were pulled out by the pirates. In fact, her son was unharmed.

To help her son out, Zhang Qian and his father went to Beijing many times looking for help from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Transport and the Ministry of Commerce.

Their nightmare ended on July 17, when the crew was released.

"On July 17, the pirates took us to a beach and forced us to leave. I thought that they were going to execute us," he said. "We walked forward for a while, and when I turned my head, I saw that the pirates were gone."

Soon after that, the men were picked up by a helicopter from a Chinese warship, and they got their first showers in 19 months.

Zhang Leilei came back to his village on Wednesday morning, and all of his relatives lined up in front of his house to welcome him.

Zhang's fellow crew member Li Guoqi, 22, said he will never work on the sea anymore.

"I thought that being a seaman would make me a lot of money, but all I got was torture in the past five years," he said. "I will be obedient and dutiful to my parents in the future."

Training needed

Zhang Leilei said he had little knowledge about sailing and Somali pirates before the trawler was hijacked. "The labor service company in my hometown just told us that being a fisherman would make us a big fortune, and we didn't receive any training," he said.

Ocean-shipping experts said shipping companies or private boat owners have to take more measures against pirate attacks, like providing better training for sailors and getting protection from the Chinese navy on pirates-infested waters.

Compared with the monthly salary of \$250, emergency train-

ing seems more valuable and important, Zhang said.

"International navigation is very complicated, and a little negligence will put ships in danger, though most sailors are well experienced," said Shao Zheping, head of the Navigation College of Jimei University in Xiamen. Shao worked with the 6th Chinese naval escort flotilla in 2010 and 2011.

People easily get tired on a ship where they cannot enjoy high-quality food and good sleep. So sailors can't focus their attention on the surrounding waters for a long time. But they still have to strictly follow the emergency plan set by the Maritime Safety Administration. Sailors have to send warnings on the first sight of suspected pirates, then search for help from the navy. The last resort may be to get into the safety cabin.

Some private boat owners or shipping companies did not obey the rules and got hijacked. In 2010, Shao picked up a Chinese ship hijacked by pirates off Somali shore after prolonged negotiations. The ship's lookout saw a suspicious boat coming toward the ship in the Gulf of Aden. But he just saw one man on the boat, while other pirates covered themselves with cloth.

The lookout shot a warning to the crew and the crew came up to the deck. They were not preparing for "battle", but making fun of the lookout. Soon, other pirates showed their guns and captured three sailors who did not manage to get into the safety cabin.

Somali pirates are active around the Gulf of Aden, but ships can apply to be escorted by the Chinese navy. "That is the best choice to ensure safety," Shao said, adding that the navy will keep a close eye on all ships and even send armed soldiers onboard in extreme cases.

"The most important thing is that the escort navy must get information about ships being threatened by pirates, and so the awareness to be on high alert has to be raised for sailors when the ships plow the waves," Shao said.

Ships have to call the navy for help when they are under attack. When they get word of a threat, frigates will rush to the ship to drive away pirates. Sometimes, a helicopter lifts off from a nearby frigate and fires warning shots at the pirates, who turn and flee at the sight of the oncoming warship.

According to the International Maritime Organization, 69 pirate attacks occurred around the Gulf of Aden from January to June, but 163 ships were attacked in the same period last year. The number of hijacked ships dropped to 13 in the first six months, while it was 21 from January to June in 2011.

For Shao, the Gulf of Aden waters are becoming safer than before due to the presence of the Chinese navy. More than 30,000 ships go through the gulf every year, he said, but only about 50 ships are hijacked.

"As long as sailors fully do their job and trust the escort navy, ships can still get through safely," Shao said.

Zhang Leilei, Liu Hua and Qi Xin contributed to this story.

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