Trump was railing up “crazies” in words over the past week, since have been engaged in a war of more than five years in Hanoi, who weren’t captured.”

former prisoner of war: “He’s not saying of the Arizona senator and inadequate. Trump’s incendiary rhetoric was or equivocation about Mr. T quán the presidential campaign, but it was not until Saturday, Mr. Cosby said, she pleaded guilty to seven counts of or sexual assault, including drugging and molesting her. Bill Cosby admitted to all of those counts, but he said he didn’t know what she was talking about. The man who was once celebrated as a played and been known for his charity and humor, now faces charges that he assaulted a woman during the 1960s at a Philadelphia hotel, where he was once a popular entertainer. Cosby has for years managed to keep private but was obtained by the Deposition as graphic detail.

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Who Advises Candidate Trump? (A Hint: His Name Is Donald)

In a reaction that highlighted Mr. Leopold’s growing criticism.

The oceans, plied by more than 5,200 seafarers were floating in the ocean, some clinging to life, others taking pictures of the ships’ engines idle loudly, at times waiting as bus after bus of the line but never board, in stead waiting as bus after bus.

In Fiji last year, then posted on YouTube, then shared a McDonald’s vanilla “dog food.” Another day, a couple of men on deck who appear to be “pins,” the anti-anxiety pill Klosterman, who moved from party to party, consumed alcohol, then passed for farmland.

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Mr. Liu, 62, said while intoxicated, and prosecutors say collision with a limousine on Long Island.

Mr. Trump refused to have any contact with the White House staff members who were involved in a meeting to discuss the possibility of unloading sanctions on Iran before they were lifted.

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Pirates and Robbers

The predicament faced by Figure 24 is a common one for other merchant mariners, as well. They are often alone, far from shore, and at the mercy of anyone who might choose to attack them. The potential for violence is high, as the ship's crew struggles to defend themselves against their aggressors. The only hope is to rely on their training and the weapons they carry, hoping that they will be able to repel any attack.

Rippling Waters

The ship's engines hum and the crew works to maintain their vigilance. They must be prepared at all times, for the danger never truly goes away. The crew is determined to survive and return home, but they also know that the risk is great. They are reminded of the sacrifices made by their predecessors, who fought to protect the nation's interests and ensure the safety of all merchant mariners.

Quickly客房

The ship is now at sea, and the crew works to maintain their focus and preparedness. They are always aware of the potential for violence, and they must be ready to respond at a moment's notice. The crew is determined to protect the ship and its passengers, and they are committed to returning home safely.

World Briefing

The Obama administration has warned that it will not accept any Iranian bid for a nuclear weapons deal. "If Congress says 'no' to this deal," the president said, "we will walk away." The administration has emphasized the importance of maintaining a strong alliance with Congress, and it has been clear that it will not tolerate any concessions on the part of the Iranians.

U.N. Vote on Iran Deal Inked

The deal is set to be presented to the Security Council of the United Nations for ratification, and it is expected that it will be passed. However, there are concerns that the deal may not be sufficient to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapons program. The administration has been clear that it will not accept any deal that fails to meet its criteria, and it has been clear that it will not accept any deal that fails to meet the standards set by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

World Briefing

The South Korean government has expressed its commitment to the joint military exercises with the United States. "These exercises are crucial for ensuring our security," the South Korean defense minister said, "and we will continue to work with the United States to strengthen our defense capabilities." The exercises are an important part of the alliance between the two countries, and they are seen as a way to deter North Korean aggression.

World Briefing

The Israeli government has decided to continue with its plan to annex the West Bank. "We have made a commitment to our people," the Israeli prime minister said, "and we will not back down from our obligations." The annexation plan has been met with protests from the international community, and it is expected that the plan will be met with opposition.

World Briefing

North Korea has announced that it will conduct a military exercise near the border with South Korea. "This exercise is to demonstrate our military readiness," the North Korean defense minister said, "and to show the world that we are prepared to defend our country." The exercise is seen as a threat to the stability of the region, and it is expected that it will be met with opposition from South Korea and the United States.

World Briefing

The Obama administration has announced that it will increase its support for the Syrian opposition. "We will provide additional assistance to the Syrian opposition," the president said, "and we will continue to work with our partners to provide necessary support." The administration has been clear that it will not support any group that is involved in terrorism, and it has been clear that it will not support any group that is not committed to the overthrow of the Assad regime.
Video Captures 4 Murders, But Killers Go Unpunished

Unarmed Men Are Gunned Down at Sea, Where No Legal System Prevails

A sequence of images taken from a video of men being killed at sea that was found on a cellphone left in a taxi in Fiji.

By IAN URBINA

SHARJAH KHALID PORT, United Arab Emirates

The man bobbing in the sea raises his arms in a seeming sign of surrender before he is shot in the head. He floats face down as his blood stains the blue water.

A slow-motion slaughter unfolds over the next 6 minutes and 58 seconds. Three other men floating in the ocean, some clinging to what looks like the wreckage of an overturned wooden boat, are surrounded by several large white tuna longliners. The sky above is clear and blue; the sea below, dark and choppy. As the ships’ engines idle loudly, at least 40 rounds are fired as the unarmed men are methodically picked off.

“Shoot, shoot, shoot!” commands a voice over one of the ship’s loudspeakers as the final man is killed. Soon after, a group of men on deck who appear to be crew members laugh among themselves, then pose for selfies.

Despite dozens of witnesses on at least four ships, those killings remain a mystery. No one even reported the incident — there is no requirement to do so under maritime law nor any clear method for mariners, who move from port to port, to volunteer what they know. Law enforcement officials learned of the deaths only after a video of the killings was found on a cellphone left in a taxi in Fiji last year, then posted on the Internet.

With no bodies, no identified victims and no exact location of where the shootings occurred, it is unclear which, if any, government will take responsibility for leading an investigation. Taiwanese fishing authorities, who based on the video connected a fishing boat from Taiwan to the scene but learned little from the captain, say they believe the dead men were part of a failed pirate attack. But maritime security experts, warning that piracy has become a convenient cover for sometimes fatal score-settling, said it is just as likely that the men were local fishermen in disputed waters, mutinied crew, castoff stowaways or thieves caught stealing fish or bait.
“Summary execution, vigilantism, overzealous defense, call it what you will,” said Klaus Luhta, a lawyer with the International Organization of Masters, Mates & Pilots, a seafarers’ union. “This boils down just the same to a case of murder at sea and a question of why it’s allowed to happen.”

The oceans, plied by more ships than ever before, are also more armed and dangerous than any time since World War II, naval historians say. Thousands of seamen every year are victims of violence, with hundreds killed, according to maritime security officials, insurers and naval researchers. Last year in three regions alone — the western Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia and the Gulf of Guinea off West Africa — more than 5,200 seafarers were attacked by pirates and robbers and more than 500 were taken hostage, a database built by The New York Times shows.

Many merchant vessels hired private security starting in 2008 as pirates began operating across larger expanses of the ocean, outstripping governments’ policing capacities. Guns and guards at sea are now so ubiquitous that a niche industry of floating armories has emerged. The vessels — part storage depot, part bunkhouse — are positioned in high-risk areas of international waters and house hundreds of assault rifles, small arms and ammunition. Guards on board wait, sometimes for months in decrepit conditions, for their next deployment.

Though pirate attacks on large container ships, like that depicted in the film “Captain Phillips,” have dropped sharply over the past several years, other forms of violence remain pervasive.

Armed gangs run protection rackets requiring ship captains to pay for safe passage in the Bay of Bengal near Bangladesh. Nigerian marine police officers routinely work in concert with fuel thieves, according to maritime insurance investigators. Off the coast of Somalia, United Nations officials say, some pirates who used to target bigger ships have transitioned into “security” work on board foreign and local fishing vessels, fending off armed attacks, but also firing on rivals to scare them away.

Provocations are common. Countries are racing one another to map and lay claim to untapped oil, gas or other mineral resources deep in the ocean, sparking clashes and boat burnings. From the Mediterranean to offshore Australia to the Black Sea, human traffickers carrying refugees and migrants sometimes ram competitors’ boats or deliberately sink their own ships to get rid of their illicit passengers or force a rescue.

Violence among fishing boats is widespread and getting worse. Heavily subsidized Chinese and Taiwanese vessels are aggressively expanding their reach, said Graham Southwick, the president of the Fiji Tuna Boat Owners Association. Radar advancements and the increased use of so-called fish-aggregating devices — floating objects that attract schools of fish — have heightened tensions as fishermen are more prone to crowd the same spots. “Catches shrink, tempers fray, fighting starts,” Mr. Southwick said. “Murder on these boats is relatively common.”

The violent crime rate related to fishing boats is easily 20 times that of crimes involving tankers, cargo ships or passenger ships, said Charles N. Dragonette, who tracked seafaring attacks globally for the United States Office of Naval Intelligence until 2012. “So long as the victims were Indonesian, Malay, Vietnamese, Filipino, just not European or American, the story never resonated,” he said.

Prosecutions for crimes at sea are rare — one former United States Coast Guard official put it at “less than 1 percent” — because many ships lack insurance and captains are averse to the delays and prying that can come with a police investigation. The few military and law enforcement ships that patrol international waters are usually forbidden from boarding ships flying another country’s flag unless given permission. Witnesses willing to speak up are scarce; so is physical evidence.

Violence at sea and on land are handled differently, Mr. Dragonette said. “Ashore, no matter how brutal the repression or how corrupt the local government, someone will know who the victims are, where they were, that they did not return,” he said. “At sea, anonymity is the rule.”
Pirates and Robbers

The creaky wooden fishing boat strained to cut through eight-foot swells on a clear black night, as its captain, who goes only by the name Rio, spread out a regional map.

Headed north, about 50 miles from the Natuna Islands in the South China Sea, he tapped his finger on his location, widened his eyes and contorted his face to register fear. Then, he silently reached over and opened a wheelhouse compartment revealing a Glock handgun.

Security contractors often exercise to alleviate boredom between deployments. Left, an employee inspected a weapon on the Resolution, a floating armory in the Gulf of Oman.

He had a good reason to be armed. The waters in this region, especially those near Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam, are among the most perilous in the world. More than 3,100 mariners were assaulted or kidnapped in the area last year, according to the Times database, consisting of more than 6,000 crime reports.

The database includes information provided by the Office of Naval Intelligence; two maritime security firms, OceanusLive and Risk Intelligence; and a research group called Oceans Beyond Piracy. No international agency comprehensively tracks maritime violence.

The death tolls in these attacks are murky because follow-up investigations are rare, police reports often lack details and bodies tend to disappear at sea. But maritime researchers estimated that hundreds of seafarers are killed annually in attacks. (They caution those numbers are likely to be undercounts because they
do not include deaths close to shore or in some particularly dangerous areas where deaths are rarely reported to international authorities.)

Typical culprits included: rubber-skiff pirates armed with rocket-propelled grenades, night-stalking fuel thieves, hit-and-run bandits wielding machetes. But a variety of other actors appear too, and many of them are not as they initially seem: hijackers masquerading as marine police officers, human traffickers posing as fishermen, security guards moonlighting as arms dealers.

For instance, there were 10 Sri Lankan migrants, a group that included women and children, who were smuggled aboard a fishing boat in 2012 near the island nation. When their demands to set a new course for Australia were refused, the migrants attacked the crew, killing at least two men by throwing them overboard. Or the three captive Burmese workers who in 2009 escaped their Thai trawler in the South China Sea by leaping overboard, swimming to a nearby yacht, killing its owner and stealing his lifeboat.

The waters near Bangladesh illustrate why maritime violence is frequently overlooked by the international community. In the past five years, nearly 100 sailors and fishermen have been killed annually in Bangladeshi waters — and as least as many taken hostage — in a string of attacks by armed gangs, according to local media and police reports.

Armed assaults have been a problem there for two decades, according to insurance and maritime security analysts. In 2013, the Bangladeshi media reported the abduction of more than 700 fishermen, 150 in September alone. Forty were reported killed in a single episode, many of them with their feet and hands bound before being thrown overboard.

These attacks were usually conducted by the half-dozen armed gangs that operate protection rackets in the Bay of Bengal and the swampland inland waters called the Sundarbans. Last year, they engaged in gun battles with the Bangladesh Air Force and Coast Guard during government raids on coastal camps and hostage ships.

Bangladesh’s former foreign minister, Dr. Dipu Moni, reprimanded the international shipping industry and the foreign and local news media several years ago for defaming the country by describing its waters as a “high risk” zone for piracy.

“There has not been a single incident of piracy” in years, Dr. Moni said in a December 2011 written statement, adding that most of the violence off the nation’s coast involved petty theft and robberies, most often committed by “dacoits” (a term derived from the Hindi word for bandits).

Those claims pivot on a legal distinction between piracy, which under international law occurs on the high seas or in waters farther than 12 miles from shore, and robbery, which involves attacks closer to land.

Insurance companies once charged $500 for each trip to and from the ports located in the west of India, but increased the rate to $150,000, given the area’s piracy-prone designation, a Bangladeshi foreign ministry official said during a news conference in December 2011. After Bangladeshi officials protested to the International Maritime Bureau, which tracks piracy at sea, that their country was stigmatized as a high-piracy zone, the group amended its website to say its warning covered piracy and armed robbery.

In an interview, Mukundan Pottengal, the director of the bureau, which is primarily funded by shipping companies and insurers, said his organization does not try to determine the exact location of attacks or whether they are in national or international waters, partly because these details are often contested by countries.

“Whether they are called pirates or robbers is a legal distinction,” he said. “It does not change the nature of their act or the danger to the ship or crew when armed strangers get on board their ship.”

On his fishing boat, Rio said that violence is just a part of life at sea. “You must be ready, always ready,” he said. For instance, he explained that larger, unlicensed fishing vessels in the area often plow through local fishermen’s nets, not just eliminating their catch, but destroying their livelihoods.

Making a hand gesture as though he was firing his gun in the air, Rio revved his engine, lurching the boat forward, showing how he charged at others in these situations.

A wiry chain-smoker, Rio recounted the last time he used his gun. A year earlier, he said, he fired at a bigger ship that approached his boat late at night without permission. Rio said he then sped away, uncertain whether he had hit anyone on board.
Asked whether he reported the shooting to the police, Rio crinkled his face as if he did not understand. After several silent minutes, he asked: “Why would anyone report that?”

**Floating Armories**

About 25 miles offshore from the United Arab Emirates in the Gulf of Oman, a half-dozen private security guards sat on the upper deck of the Resolution, a St. Kitts and Nevis-flagged floating armory. After the men traded war stories about past encounters with pirates, the conversation soon turned to a shared concern: the growing influx of untrained hires into the booming $13 billion-a-year security business.

“It’s like handing a bachelor a newborn,” one guard said, describing how some of the new recruits react when given a semiautomatic weapon. Many of the new hires lack combat experience, speak virtually no English (despite a fluency requirement), and do not know how to clean or fix their weapons, said the guards, most of whom spoke only on the condition of anonymity for fear they would be blacklisted from jobs. Some of the recruits show up to work carrying ammunition in Ziploc bags or shoe boxes.

The maritime security industry includes fewer fly-by-night companies today than it did several years ago, according to the guards. But the potential for mishandling attacks — with possibly deadly consequences — has increased over the past year or so, they argued, because the shipping industry has been cutting costs, shifting from four-man security teams to teams of two or three less experienced men.

The 141-foot Resolution is among several dozen converted cargo ships, tugboats and demining barges that have been parked in high-risk areas of the Red Sea, Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, usually just outside national waters. The guards pay as little as $25 per night to stay on the ship (the charge for carrying the men to and from client ships is often several thousand dollars), and check their weapons into a locked storage container upon arrival. Then they wait, sometimes for weeks, for their next job.

Somali piracy spurred many governments to encourage merchant vessels to arm themselves or hire private security, a break from the longstanding practice of nations trying to maintain a near monopoly on the use of force. Meanwhile, growing terrorism concerns led port officials globally to impose tighter restrictions on weapons being carried into national waters. Floating armories emerged as a solution.

On the Resolution, security “team leaders,” most of them American, British or South African

Clockwise from near right, the Resolution at sunrise in the Gulf of Oman, about 25 miles offshore. Smaller boats are used to ferry security contractors to and from their deployments. A contractor checking his phone on his bunk.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BEN SOLOMON/THE NEW YORK TIMES
military veterans, explained what makes gun battles at sea so different from those on land.

“Between fight or flight,” said Cameron Mouat, a guard working for MNG Maritime, a British company that charters the Resolution. “Out here, there’s just fight.” There is no place to hide, no falling back, no air support, no ammunition drops, he said. Targets are almost always fast moving. Aim is usually wobbly because the ship constantly sways.

Some ships are the equivalent of several football fields in length, too big, these guards contended, for a two- or three-man security detail to handle, especially when attackers arrive in multiple boats.

Discerning threats is difficult. Semiautomatic weapons, formerly a pirates’ telltale sign, are now found on virtually all boats traversing dangerous waters, they said. Smugglers, with no intention of attacking, routinely nestle close to larger merchant ships to hide in their radar shadow and avoid being detected by coastal authorities. Fishing boats also sometimes tuck behind larger ships because they churn up seabottom sediment that attracts fish.

“The concern isn’t just whether a new guard will misjudge or panic and fire too soon,” explained a South African guard. “It’s also whether he will shoot soon enough.” If guards hesitate too long, he said, they miss the chance to take preventive measures that can help avoid fatal force, like firing warning shots, flares or water cannons, or incapacitating an approaching boat’s engine.

The armories themselves can be crucibles of violence. Guards climbing off another floating armory, the Seapol One, pulled out their smartphones and showed pictures of the infested, cramped, trash-strewn cabins where eight men bunked.

Like most floating armories, the Seapol One, run by the Sri Lankan firm Avant Garde Maritime Services, had no armed security of its own to police its guests or protect against pirates who might seek to commandeer the arsenal. Most coastal nations oppose the armories, though they can do little to stop them since they are situated in international waters.

None of the guards interviewed knew of any fatal clashes on the armories. But there was no shortage of friction, they said. A Latvian guard, weighing more than 300 pounds and standing well over six feet, relieved himself in the shower because he could not fit in the bathroom stalls. Confronted by other guards, he refused to clean it up.

Several days earlier a heated argument erupted between two South African guards and their team leader. Unpaid for nearly a month, the men had been abandoned by their security company and left on the Seapol with no way to get back to port.

Kevin Thompson, a British guard, described intense boredom and isolation, which some guards relieved with occasional drinks of forbidden alcohol or by lifting weights, assisted by steroids. Describing the armories, he said, “They’re basically psychological pressure cookers.”

### Unsolved Killings

The video of the killing of the four men speaks to a survival-of-the-fittest brutality common at sea, according to a dozen security experts who reviewed the footage. They speculated that one gunman, quite likely a private security guard, did all the shooting, using a semiautomatic weapon. And, they said, the four ships at the scene were probably associated with one another, perhaps by shared ownership. “You don’t rob a bank in mixed company,” one former United States Coast Guard official explained.

Last summer, the police in the Fijian capital of Suva closed their investigation into the shootings. They reasoned that the incident did not occur in their national waters, nor did it involve their vessels. Since no Fijian mariners had been reported missing, they concluded none of their citizens were among the victims.

When governments investigate incidents like this, their goal is typically not to find the culprit, said Glen Forbes from OceanusLive, the maritime risk firm. “It’s to clear their name.”

The video, which includes people speaking Chinese, Indonesian and Vietnamese languages, shows three large vessels circling the floating men. A banner that says “Safety is No. 1” in Chinese hangs in the background on the deck of one of the ships. A fourth vessel, which maritime records indicate is a 725-ton Taiwanese-owned tuna longliner called Chun I 217, passes by in the background.

Lin Yu-chih, the owner of the Chun I 217, which remains at sea, said that he did not know
whether any of the more than a dozen other ships he owns or operates were present when the men were shot. “Our captain left as soon as possible,” Mr. Lin said, referring to the shooting scene.

Though the date of the shooting is unknown, he said that he believed it occurred in 2013 in the Indian Ocean, where the Chun I 217 has been sailing for the last five years.

Mr. Lin declined to release any details about the crew of the Chun I 217 or the report he said he asked the captain to write about the killings after the Taiwan police contacted his company. Mr. Lin, a board member of the Taiwanese tuna longliners association, said the private security guards on his ships were provided by a Sri Lankan company, which he declined to name. The Taiwan prosecutor’s office, which is looking into the matter, declined to comment.

With one of the world’s largest tuna fleets, Taiwan’s fishing industry is among the nation’s biggest employers and most politically powerful sectors.

Two Taiwanese fishing officials later said that the company authorized to put private security guards on Taiwanese ships was Avant Garde Maritime Services, the same business that runs the Seapol One, the armory in the Gulf of Oman. The company declined to answer questions about its guards or its floating armories.

Tzu-Yaw Tsay, the director of the Taiwanese fisheries agency, declined during an interview to release the Chun I 217’s crew list or captain’s name. He suggested, though, that the men in the water were most likely pirates who had been rebuffed.

“We don’t know what happened,” Mr. Tsay then acknowledged. “So there’s no way for us to say whether it’s legal.”

Susan C. Beachy contributed research.
Texas County’s Racial Past Seen as Prelude to a Death

Rights Battles Divided Prairie View: Long Before Sandra Bland’s Traffic Stop

By EMMA G. FITZSIMMONS and DAVID W. CHEN

In Maryland, a century-old rail tunnel needed emergency repairs this week. In eastern Connecticut, an aging swing bridge failed to close twice last month.

As the Baltimore and Potomac Tunnel in Maryland, opened in 1886, and the swing bridge peril in Connecticut, the nation’s Northeast Corridor, the nation’s busiest rail line, is verging in an extraordinary production effort yet in this line of attack on a vital rail corridor, the nation’s ridership has been especially clear.

Amtrak, the nation’s largest passenger rail carrier, said last week it was temporarily shutting down a pair of swing bridges to repair them. One, the Great Bridge swing bridge over the Norfolk Southern Railroad in Newport News, Virginia, is expected to remain closed through the end of the month.

The nation’s ridership has been especially clear in the Northeast Corridor, where Amtrak and other passenger rail carriers serve more than 75 million passengers each year. The Northeast Corridor, which runs from Washington to Boston and carries nearly 9 million passengers a year, is the nation’s busiest passenger rail line.

The Baltimore and Potomac Tunnel, which runs from Washington to New York City, is the nation’s oldest and most congested rail line.

The Northeast Corridor is the nation’s busiest passenger rail line, carrying nearly 9 million passengers a year. The line runs from Washington to Boston and is the nation’s busiest passenger rail line.

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‘Sea Slaves’ Put in Peril
In Forced Labor for Cheap Fish

JULY 26, 2015

By Kitty Bennett

The New York Times

Standing on deck at dawn, after the nets were hauled in by the dozen, the crew of the Chuen Long got ready for the next leg of their 12-hour voyage, during which they would travel between fishing grounds in the Banda Sea of eastern Indonesia, to net the same grounds again.

Comrades in blue, 17 of them, they would split into two small groups, the young men who had been hired to work the small purse-seine boats to the north, and the veterans on the larger purse-seine boats to the south.

As much as he feared the captains, a 13-year-old Vietnamese boy named Long seemed to tangle his portion of the net with his mates.

To get away, Long had to work his way up the ranks, serving as the day crew, before serving as the day crew, before serving as the deckhand.

But after returning to port, he contacted the fishing authorities and reported his treatment.

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The crew on a Thai fishing boat in the South China Sea included two dozen Cambodian boys, some as young as 15.

**Forced Labor for Cheap Fish**

‘Sea Slaves’ Endure Danger and Debt Trawling for Pet Food

By IAN URBINA

SONGKHLA, Thailand

ANG LONG’S ordeal began in the back of a truck. After watching his younger siblings go hungry because their family’s rice patch in Cambodia could not provide for everyone, he accepted a trafficker’s offer to travel across the Thai border for a construction job.

It was his chance to start over. But when he arrived, Mr. Long was kept for days by armed men in a room near the port at Samut Prakan, more than a dozen miles southeast of Bangkok. He was then herded with six other migrants up a gangway onto a shoddy wooden ship. It was the start of three brutal years in captivity at sea.

“I cried,” said Mr. Long, 30, recounting how he was resold twice between fishing boats. After repeated escape attempts, one captain shackled him by the neck whenever other boats neared.
Mr. Long’s crews trawled primarily for forage fish, which are small and cheaply priced. Much of this catch comes from the waters off Thailand, where Mr. Long was held, and is sold to the United States, typically for canned cat and dog food or feed for poultry, pigs and farm-raised fish that Americans consume.

The misery endured by Mr. Long, who was eventually rescued by an aid group, is not uncommon in the maritime world. Labor abuse at sea can be so severe that the boys and men who are its victims might as well be captives from a bygone era. In interviews, those who fled recounted horrific violence: the sick cast overboard, the defiant beheaded, the insubordinate sealed for days below deck in a dark, fetid fishing hold.

The harsh practices have intensified in recent years, a review of hundreds of accounts from escaped deckhands provided to police, immigration and human rights workers shows. That is because of lax maritime labor laws and an insatiable global demand for seafood even as fishing stocks are depleted.

Shipping records, customs data and dozens of interviews with government and maritime officials point to a greater reliance on long-haul fishing, in which vessels stay at sea, sometimes for years, far from the reach of authorities. With rising fuel prices and fewer fish close to shore, fisheries experts predict that more boats will resort to venturing out farther, exacerbating the potential for mistreatment.

“Life at sea is cheap,” said Phil Robertson, deputy director of Human Rights Watch’s Asia division. “And conditions out there keep getting worse.”

While forced labor exists throughout the world, nowhere is the problem more pronounced than here in the South China Sea, especially in the Thai fishing fleet, which faces an annual shortage of about 50,000 mariners, based on United Nations estimates. The shortfall is primarily filled by using migrants, mostly from Cambodia and Myanmar.

Many of them, like Mr. Long, are lured across the border by traffickers only to become so-called sea slaves in floating labor camps. Often they are beaten for the smallest transgressions, like stitching a torn net too slowly or mistakenly placing a mackerel into a bucket for herring, according to a United Nations survey of about 50 Cambodian men and boys sold to Thai fishing boats. Of those interviewed in the 2009 survey, 29 said they had witnessed their captain or other officers kill a worker.

The migrants, who are relatively invisible because most are undocumented, disappear beyond the horizon on “ghost ships” — unregistered vessels that the Thai government does not know exist.

They usually do not speak the language of their Thai captains, do not know how to swim, and have never seen the sea before being whisked from shore, according to interviews in Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia. These interviews, in port or on fishing boats at sea, were conducted with more than three dozen current deckhands or former crew members.

Government intervention is rare. While United Nations pacts and various human rights protections prohibit forced labor, the Thai military and law enforcement authorities do little to counter misconduct on the high seas. United Nations officials and rights organizations accuse some of them of taking bribes from traffickers to allow safe passage across the border. Migrants often report being rescued by police officers from one smuggler only to be resold to another.

Mr. Long did not know where the fish he caught ended up. He did learn, however, that most of the forage fish on the final boat where he was held in bondage was destined for a cannery called the Songkla Canning Public Company, which is a subsidiary of Thai Union Frozen Products, the country’s largest seafood company. In the past year, Thai Union has shipped more than 28 million pounds of seafood-based cat and dog food for some of the top brands sold in America including Iams, Meow Mix and Fancy Feast, according to United States Customs documents.

The United States is the biggest customer of Thai fish, and pet food is among the fastest growing exports from Thailand, more than doubling since 2009 and last year totaling more than $190 million. The average pet cat in the United States eats 30 pounds of fish per year, about double that of a typical American.

Though there is growing pressure from
Americans and other Western consumers for more accountability in seafood companies' supply chains to ensure against illegal fishing and contaminated or counterfeit fish, virtually no attention has focused on the labor that supplies the seafood that people eat, much less the fish that is fed to animals.

“How fast do their pets eat what’s put in front of them, and are there whole meat chunks in that meal?” asked Giovanni M. Turchini, an environmental professor at Deakin University in Australia who studies the global fish markets. “These are the factors that pet owners most focus on.”

Little Respite From Danger

It is difficult to overstate the dangers of commercial fishing. Two days spent more than 100 miles from shore on a Thai fishing ship with two dozen Cambodian boys, some as young as 15, showed the brutal rhythm of this work.

Rain or shine, shifts run 18 to 20 hours. Summer temperatures top 100 degrees. The deck is an obstacle course of jagged tackle, whirring winches and tall stacks of 500-pound nets. Ocean spray and fish innards make the floor skating-rink slippery. The ship seesaws, particularly in rough seas and gale
winds. Most boys work barefoot; 15-foot swells climb the sides, clipping them below the knees. Much of this occurs in pitch blackness. Purse seiners, like this ship, usually cast their nets at night when the small silver forage fish that they target — mostly jack mackerel and herring — are easier to spot.

When they are not fishing, the Cambodians, most of whom were recruited by traffickers, sort their catch and fix the nets, which are prone to ripping. One 17-year-old boy proudly showed a hand missing two fingers — severed by a nylon line that had coiled around a spinning crank. The migrants’ hands, which are virtually never fully dry, have open wounds, slit from fish scales and torn from the nets’ friction. “Fish is inside us,” one of the boys said. They stitch closed the deeper cuts themselves. Infections are constant.

Thailand’s commercial fishing fleet consists predominantly of bottom trawlers, called the strip-miners of the sea because they use nets weighted to sink to the ocean floor and ensnare almost everything in their path. But purse seine boats, like the one where these Cambodians work, are common too. They use circular nets to target fish closer to the water’s surface. After the nets are hauled upward, they are pinched at the top, like old-style coin purses.

Before arriving on the ship, most of the Cambodians had never seen a body of water larger than a lake. The few who could swim were responsible for diving into the inky sea to ensure that the 50-foot mouth of the nets closed properly. If one of them were to get tangled in the mesh and yanked underwater, it is likely that no one would notice right away. The work is frenzied and loud, as the boys chant in unison while pulling the nets.

Meals on board consist of a once-daily bowl of rice, flecked with boiled squid or other throwaway fish. In the galley, the wheel room and elsewhere, countertops crawl with roaches. The toilet is a removable wooden floorboard on deck. At night, vermin clean the boys’ unwashed plates. The ship’s mangy dog barely lifts her head when rats, which roam all over the ship, eat from her bowl.

Crew members tend to sleep in two-hour snatches, packed into an intensely hot crawl space. Too many bodies share the same air, with fishing-net hammocks hanging from a ceiling that is less than five feet above the floor. Deafening, the engine turbines throb incessantly, shaking the ship’s wooden deck. Every so often, the engine coughs a black cloud of acrid fumes into the sleeping quarters.

These conditions, which are typical on long-haul fishing vessels, are part of the reason that the Thai fishing fleet is chronically short of men. Thailand has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the world — generally less than 1 percent — which means native workers have no trouble finding easier, better paying jobs on land.

“You just have to work hard,” said Pier, 17, one of the migrants on the purse seiner. Pier, who goes by only one name, said he liked life on the ship. “Better than home,” he said, “Nothing to do there.” He flexed his sinewy biceps, showing the results of his labor.

In the dead of night, the captain spotted a school of fish on radar. He roused the crew with an air horn. Pier, in his second year of working on the ship, explained that he still owed the captain some of the $300 he paid a smuggler to get him from the border to port. The rest of his debt, $90, was from a cash advance he sent back to his family, he said. Willing to answer other questions, Pier silently looked down when asked whether he had ever been beaten. Several other boys, questioned about the same, furtively looked to the captain and shook their heads to indicate that they did not want to be interviewed.

Indentured servitude — a “travel now, pay later” labor system where people work to clear a debt typically accrued for getting free passage to another country — is common in the developing world, especially in construction, agriculture, manufacturing and the sex industry. It is more pervasive and abusive at sea, human rights experts say, because those workers are so isolated.

Historically, Thai boat captains paid large advances to deckhands so they could sustain their families during their long absences. But the country’s labor crisis has converted this up-front cash into a price per head (or “kha hua” fee) given to smugglers who ferry workers across the border.

Standing on the boat next to Pier, another Cambodian boy tried to explain how elusive the kha hua debt becomes once they leave land. Pointing to his own shadow and moving around as if he were trying to grab it, he said: “Can’t catch.”
The boat’s Thai crew master, Tang, a man with pock-marked skin and missing front teeth, ordered the boys back to work. He then ticked off a list of the pressures on deep-sea captains. Fuel costs eat up about 60 percent of a vessel’s earnings, double what they did two decades ago. Once fish are caught, storing them in melting ice is a race against the clock. As fish thaw, their protein content falls, dropping their sale price. And, Tang added, because deep-sea fishing boats work on commission, “Crews only get paid if we catch enough.”

Captains fear their crews as intensely as they drive them. Language and cultural barriers create divisions; most boats here have three Thai officers and foreign deckhands. The captain is armed, in part because of the threat of pirates, but Tang also talked of a gruesome mutiny on another ship that left all the officers dead.

Tales of forced labor are not always what they seem, according to the boat’s captain, who insisted on anonymity as a condition of allowing a reporter on board. Some workers sign up willingly, only to change their minds once at sea, while others make up stories of mistreatment in hopes of getting back to their families, he said.

Still, a half-dozen other captains acknowledged that forced labor is common. It is unavoidable, they argue, given the country’s demand for laborers. Every time a boat docks, they said, they fret that their willing workers will bolt to better-paying ships. That is also the moment when captive migrants make a run for it.

Short-handed at the 11th hour, captains sometimes take desperate measures. “They just snatch people,” one captain explained, noting that some migrants are drugged or kidnapped and forced onto boats. “Brokers charge double.”

Litany of Abuses

Traveling the coast of the South China Sea, it can seem that every migrant has his own story of abuse.

Skippers never lacked for amphetamines so laborers could work longer, but rarely stocked antibiotics for infected wounds. Former deckhands described “prison islands” — most often uninhabited atolls, of which there are hundreds in the South China Sea. Fishing captains sometimes maroon their captive crews on those islands, sometimes for weeks, while their vessels are taken to port for dry docking and repair.

Other islands, inhabited but desolate, are also used to hold crew members. Fishing boat workers on an Indonesian island called Benjina were kept in cages to prevent them from fleeing, The Associated Press reported earlier this year. Inaccessible by boat several months a year because of monsoons, Benjina had an airstrip that was rarely used and no phone or Internet service.

Thai government officials said they have stepped up the number of investigations and prosecutions and plan to continue doing so. A registration drive is underway to count undocumented workers and provide them with identity cards, added Vijavat Isarabhakdi, Thailand’s ambassador to the United States until this year. The government has also established several centers around the country for trafficking victims.

San Oo, 35, a soft-spoken Burmese man with weather-beaten skin, predicted that until ship captains are prosecuted, little will improve. He described how on his first day of two and a half years in captivity, his captain warned that he had killed the seaman Mr. Oo was replacing. “If you disobey or run or get sick I will do it again,” he recalled his captain saying.

Pak, a 38-year-old Cambodian who fled a Thai trawler last year, ended up on the Kei Islands, in Indonesia’s eastern Banda Sea. The United Nations estimated that hundreds of migrants there escaped fishing boats over the last decade. “You belong to the captain,” Pak said, recounting watching a man so desperate
that he jumped overboard and drowned. “So he can sell you if he wants.”

Critics have faulted Thailand for what they say is a deliberate failure to confront the larger causes of abuse in fishing. Compared to its neighbors, Thailand has less stringent rules on how long boats can remain at sea. Last year, it was the only country to vote against a United Nations treaty on forced labor requiring governments to punish traffickers, before reversing its stance in the face of international pressure.

Thai officials also proposed using prison labor on fishing boats as a way to shift away from migrant workers, a plan dropped after an outcry from human rights groups. Thailand currently holds the lowest ranking by the State Department of governments that do not meet minimum standards in countering human trafficking.

The other Thai industry where forced labor is common is sex work, said Mr. Robertson, from Human Rights Watch. The two industries intersect in run-down towns like Ranong, along the Thailand-Myanmar border. Labor brokers operate with impunity in these towns. Karaoke bars double as brothels and debt traps.

A tavern owner named Rui sat down to make his pitch late one night in November, pointing to two prepubescent girls who sat in a corner, wearing caked-on makeup and tight, glittery skirts. He spread a stack of Polaroid pictures of them from a year before. Each clutched a stuffed animal in the photos and looked scared. “Popular,” Rui said of the girls now. “Very popular now.”

A beer at Rui’s tavern cost about $1. Sex with a “popular” girl: $12. For the tattered men, mostly Burmese, who end up here, a couple of evenings at the tavern can add up to kingly sum. Many of them have trekked hundreds of miles by foot, not a cent on them, hoping for work. Meals, drugs and lodging, offered as favors, show up later as fees. To clear these bills, migrants are sometimes sold to the sea.

Checking boats for human rights abuses is difficult. Most fishing vessels are exempt from international rules requiring the onboard tracking systems used by law enforcement. Marine officials in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia said that their navies rarely inspect for labor and immigration violations. Authorities in those countries added that they lack boats and fuel
needed to reach the ships farthest from shore that are most prone to using captive labor.

Deep-sea fishing generally does not lend itself to timecards or pay stubs. Labor contracts common in the region often include terms that would seem unthinkable in jobs on land.

For instance, a contract from a manpower agency in Singapore, provided to The New York Times, committed deckhands to a three-year tour during which the agency retained the full $200 per month for the first six months and $150 per month thereafter. “Daily working hours will be around 18 hours,” the contract stipulates, adding that there is no overtime pay. Boats may remain at sea for longer than a year per trip. Only seawater may be used for bathing and laundry. Mariners can be traded from boat to boat at the captain's discretion.

“All biscuits, noodles, soft drinks and cigarettes” are to be purchased by the sailor, the contract says. “Any crew who breaches the contract (own sickness, lazy or rejected by the Captain, etc.) must bear all the expenses incurred in going back home.”

**Supply and Demand**

The boat that delivered Mr. Long to captivity and subsequently rescued him was known as a “mothership.” Carrying everything from fuel and extra food to spare nets and replacement labor, these lumbering vessels, often over a hundred feet long, function as the roving resupply stores of the marine world. Motherships are the reason that slow-moving trawlers can fish more than 1,500 miles from land. They allow fishermen to stay out at sea for months or years and still get their catch cleaned, canned and shipped to American shelves less than a week after netting.

But once a load of fish is transferred to a mothership, which keeps the cargo below deck in cavernous refrigerators, there is almost no way for port-side authorities to determine its provenance. It becomes virtually impossible to know whether it was caught legally by paid fishermen or poached illegally by shackled migrants.

Bar codes on pet food in some European countries enable far-flung consumers to track Thai-exported seafood to its onshore processing facilities, where it was canned or otherwise packaged. But the supply chain for the 28 million tons of forage fish caught annually around the globe, about a third of all fish caught at sea and much of it used for pet and animal feed, is invisible before that.

Sasinan Allmand, the head of corporate communications for Thai Union Frozen Products, said that her company does routine audits of its canneries and boats in port to ensure against forced and child labor. The audits involve checking crew members’ contracts, passports, proof of payment and working conditions. “We will not tolerate any human trafficking or any human rights violation of any kind,” she said. Asked whether audits are conducted on the fishing boats that stay at sea, like the one where Mr. Long was captive, she declined to respond.

Human rights advocates have called for a variety of measures to provide greater oversight, including requiring all commercial fishing ships to have electronic transponders for onshore monitoring and banning the system of long stays at sea and the supply ships that make them possible. But their efforts have gotten little traction. The profits for seafood businesses still far exceed the risks for those who exploit workers, said Mark P. Lagon, who formerly served as the State Department's ambassador at large focused on human trafficking.

Lisa K. Gibby, vice president of corporate communications for Nestlé, which makes pet food brands including Fancy Feast and Purina, said that the company is working hard to ensure that forced labor is not used to produce its pet food. “This is neither an easy nor a quick endeavor,” she added, because the fish it purchases comes from multiple ports and fishing vessels operating in international waters.

Some pet food companies are trying to move away from using fish. Mars Inc., for example, which sold more than $16 billion worth of pet food globally in 2012, roughly a quarter of the world's market, has already replaced fish meal in some of its pet food and will continue in that direction. By 2020, the company plans to use only non-threatened fish caught legally or raised on farms and certified by third-party auditors as not being linked to forced labor.

Though Mars has been more proactive on these issues than many of its competitors, Allyson Park, a Mars spokeswoman, conceded that the fishing industry has “real traceability issues” and struggles to ensure proper working conditions. This is even more challenging, she said, since Mars does not purchase fish directly
from docks but further up the supply chain.

Over the past year, Mars received more than 90,000 cartons of cat and dog food from the cannery supplied by one of the boats where Lang Long was held captive, according to the Customs documents.

**Shackled and Afraid**

In Songkhla, on Thailand’s southeast coast, Suchat Junthalukkhana thumbed through an inch-thick binder, each page with a photograph of a fleeing mariner whom his organization, the Stella Maris Seafarers Center, had helped.

“We get a new case every week,” he said.

The fate of the men who escape from the fishing boats often relies on chance encounters with altruistic strangers who contact Stella Maris or the other groups that make up an underground railroad that runs through Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia and Thailand.

One such inadvertent rescuer was Som Nang, 41, who said his name means “good luck” in Khmer. A squat man, he is quick to show off the retractable metal rod that he keeps with him for protection.

Having worked dockside for several years, Som Nang had heard the tales of fishing-boat brutality. None of it prepared him, however, for what he would witness on his maiden voyage on a mothership late in 2013.

“I wish I had never seen it,” Som Nang said, sitting in his cinder-block home just outside Songkhla. After a four-day trip from shore, Som Nang’s supply boat pulled alongside a dilapidated Thai-flagged trawler with an eight-man crew that had just finished two weeks fishing in Indonesian waters where they were not allowed.

It was difficult not to notice Mr. Long, who crouched near the front of the fishing boat, Som Nang said. Padlocked around his bruised neck was a rusty metal collar attached to a three-foot chain looped to an anchor post. Mr. Long, who was the only Cambodian among the Burmese deckhands and the Thai senior crew, stared, unblinking, at anyone willing to make eye contact.

“Please help me,” Som Nang, who is also Cambodian, recounted Mr. Long whispering in Khmer. That was 30 months after Mr. Long had met a trafficker along the Thai-Cambodian border during a festival. Mr. Long said he never in-
tended to work in Thailand but the job offer was attractive. When he instead arrived at a port near Samut Prakan, the trafficker sold him to a boat captain for about $530, less than a water buffalo typically costs. He was then marched up a gangplank, and sent due west for four days.

A police report later described his account of his arrival in captivity: “Three fishing boats surrounded the supply boat and began fighting for Mr. Long,” the report says. Similar arguments broke out a year later when Mr. Long was sold again in the middle of the night between trawlers.

The longer he spent on the boats, the more his trafficking debt should have lightened, bettering his prospects for release. But the opposite was the case, Mr. Long explained. The more experience he had, the bleaker his fate, the higher the price on his head, the hotter the arguments over him between short-handed trawler captains.

Having never seen the sea before, Mr. Long seemed to tangle his portion of the nets more than others, he said. All the fish looked the same to him — small and silver — making sorting difficult. Slowed at first by intense seasickness, Mr. Long said he sped up after witnessing a captain whipping a man for working too slowly.

Mr. Long suffered similarly. “He was beat with a pole made of wood or metal,” said a case report about him from the Office of the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand. “Some days he had rest of only 1 hour.” When drinking water ran low, deckhands stole foul-tasting ice from the barrels of fish. If one of the seamen put gear away incorrectly, the crew master docked the day’s meal for the offender.

Mr. Long said he often considered jumping overboard to escape. He did not know how to swim, though, and he never once saw land during his time at sea, Mr. Long told a doctor who later treated him. At night he had access to the ship’s radio. But he had no idea whom or how he could call for help.

As much as he feared the captains, Mr. Long said, the ocean scared him more. Waves, some five stories high, battered the deck in rough seas.

When Som Nang’s boat showed up, Mr. Long had been wearing the shackle on and off for about nine months. The captain typically put it on him once a week, Mr. Long said, whenever other boats approached.

After offloading fish for about 10 minutes, Som Nang said he asked the captain why Mr. Long was chained. “Because he keeps trying to escape,” the captain replied, according to Som Nang. Based on the looks he got from the crew on his mothership, Som Nang said he figured it best to stop asking questions. But after returning to port, he contacted Stella Maris, which began raising the 25,000 baht, roughly $750, needed to buy Mr. Long’s freedom.

Over the next several months, Som Nang resupplied the fishing boat twice. Each time, Mr. Long was shackled. Som Nang said he discreetly tried to reassure him that he was working to free him.

In April 2014, Mr. Long’s captivity ended in the most undramatic of ways. Som Nang carried a brown paper bag full of Thai currency from Stella Maris to a meeting point in the middle of the South China Sea, roughly a week’s travel from shore. With few words exchanged, the money was handed to Mr. Long’s captain. His debt paid, Mr. Long, rail-thin, stepped onto Som Nang’s boat and began his journey back to solid ground and a hope for home.

Thai immigration officials who have investigated his case say they found it credible. Mr. Long is in the process of being repatriated back to his native village, Koh Sotin, in Cambodia. He hopes to go back to his old job cleaning a local Buddhist temple, he said. Thai and Indonesian marine officials say they are trying to locate his last boat captain but they are not hopeful because there are so many of these illegal vessels.

During his six-day voyage back to shore on the mothership, Mr. Long cried and slept most of the time. Som Nang said the crew hid him to avoid word getting out to other fishing boats about their role in the rescue.

Mr. Long, who has a perpetually vacant gaze, said he never wanted to eat fish again. He added that at first he had tried to keep track of the passing days and months at sea by etching notches in the wooden railing. Eventually he gave that up. “I never thought I would see land again,” he said.

Som Nang, who is now a security guard at a factory, said he stopped working at sea shortly after his rescue trip. His explanation: “I don’t like what is out there.”
The Thunder, a fugitive fishing trawler, was shadowed by the Sea Shepherd vessels Bob Barker and Sam Simon in February, during a pursuit that lasted 110 days. The Thunder, which is the world's most notorious fish poacher, began sliding towards a Most Wanted List, a status reserved for only four other ships in the world. It was an unexpected end to an extraordinary cat-and-mouse, the ships maneuvered through an ocean expanse, their vessels full with catch and the Thunder's engine room almost submerged in murky water. "There is no need to waste energy," one of the Sea Shepherd operators radioed back to the Thunder's owners, "we have been watching you for a long time.

The Thunder was finally captured on February 26, 2015, after a week-long pursuit. The ship's owner, a notorious fish poacher, was arrested and the ship was impounded. The capture was a significant victory for Sea Shepherd, a group working to end illegal fishing in the world's oceans. The Thunder's capture is just one of many recent successes for Sea Shepherd, which has been working to end illegal fishing for more than a decade. Sea Shepherd's efforts have resulted in the capture of dozens of illegal fishing vessels around the world. The organization has also worked to raise awareness about the issue of illegal fishing and has partnered with governments and other organizations to develop solutions to the problem. The capture of the Thunder is a significant step towards the goal of ending illegal fishing in the world's oceans.
November 9, 2015

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Illegal 'Manning Agencies' Put Men in Debt, Abused or Killed at Sea

Theft of Half a Million from Michaels Stores

New York Times Late Edition

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Illegal 'Manning Agencies' Put Men in Debt, Then in Treacherous Maritime Jobs

ILLEGAL "MANNING AGENCIES" TRICKED THOUSANDS OF MANNED INTO TWENTY YEARS OF DEBT, ABUSE OR DEATH

Illegal 'Manning Agencies' Put Men in Debt, Abused or Killed at Sea

A photo of Eril Andrade in his family's abandoned house in the Philippines. He died on a fishing ship, body cut up and buried.
Tricked on Land, and Indebted, Then Abused at Sea

Celia Robelo, 46, who faces a possible death sentence in the Philippines, was introduced to Ms. Conception by a recruiter who later said he had no records of her recruitment. "If Mr. Andrade’s experience was the exception, the case of Mrs. Robelo is the rule," said Dr. Chung, the captain of his ship.

"He has done nothing," Mr. Andrade’s wife, Ms. Robelo, said in an interview by phone from the town jail here.

For his wife’s sake, Mr. Andrade left his ship in the waters of the Philippine Sea to seek a better life.

"If no one has work, a job is available to answer questions," Mr. Li, 39, a business engineer in the Vanke complex, said.

But when Mr. Li and many of the other residents were stunned by the explosions at the port, they refused the settlements, and federal officials have not released any information about the $200 monthly wage that he was promised.

Chung, the captain of Mr. Andrade’s ship, said Mr. Andrade "did not work there" because he was still in debt. He said his brother, who also worked on the ship, had been killed on Sunday.

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Tricked While on Land, Abused or Killed at Sea

Illegal ‘Manning Agencies’ Put Men in Debt, Then in Treacherous Maritime Jobs

By IAN URBINA

LINABUAN SUR, the Philippines

WHEN Eril Andrade left this small village, he was healthy and hoping to earn enough on a fishing boat on the high seas to replace his mother’s leaky roof.

Seven months later, his body was sent home in a wooden coffin: jet black from having been kept in a fish freezer aboard a ship for more than a month, missing an eye and his pancreas, and covered in cuts and bruises, which an autopsy report concluded had been inflicted before death.

“Sick and resting,” said a note taped to his body. Handwritten in Chinese by the ship’s captain, it stated only that Mr. Andrade, 31, had fallen ill in his sleep.

Mr. Andrade, who died in February 2011, and nearly a dozen other men in his village had been recruited by an illegal “manning agency,” tricked with false promises of double the actual wages and then sent to an apartment in Singapore, where they were locked up for weeks, according to interviews and affidavits taken by local prosecutors. While they waited to be deployed to Taiwanese tuna ships, several said, a gatekeeper demanded sex from them for assignments at sea.

Once aboard, the men endured 20-hour workdays and brutal beatings, only to return home unpaid and deeply in debt from thousands of dollars in upfront costs, prosecutors say.

Thousands of maritime employment agencies around the world provide a vital service, supplying crew members for ships, from small trawlers to giant container carriers, and handling everything from paychecks to plane tickets. While many companies operate responsibly, over all the industry, which has drawn little attention, is poorly regulated. The few rules on the books do not even apply to fishing ships, where the worst abuses tend to happen, and enforcement is lax.

Illegal agencies operate with even greater impunity, sending men to ships notorious for poor safety and labor records; instructing them to travel on tourist or transit visas, which exempt them from the protections of many labor and anti-trafficking laws; and disavowing them if they are denied pay, injured, killed, abandoned or arrested at sea.

“It’s lies and cheating on land, then beatings and death at sea, then shame
and debt when these men get home,” said Shelley Thio, a board member of Transient Workers Count Too, a migrant workers’ advocacy group in Singapore. “And the Manning agencies are what make it all possible.”

Step Up Marine Enterprise, the Singapore-based company that recruited Mr. Andrade and the other villagers, has a well-documented record of trouble, according to an examination of court records, police reports and case files in Singapore and the Philippines. In episodes dating back two decades, the company has been tied to trafficking, severe physical abuse, neglect, deceptive recruitment and failure to pay hundreds of seafarers in India, Indonesia, Mauritius, the Philippines and Tanzania.

Still, its owners have largely escaped accountability. Last year, for example, prosecutors opened the biggest trafficking case in Cambodian history, involving more than 1,000 fishermen, but had no jurisdiction to charge Step Up for recruiting them. In 2001, the Supreme Court of the Philippines harshly reprimanded Step Up and a partner company in Manila for systematically duping men, knowingly sending them to abusive employers and cheating them, but Step Up’s owners faced no penalties.

The Philippine authorities have charged 11 people tied to Step Up with trafficking and illegal recruitment of Mr. Andrade and others from the Philippines. But only one person, allegedly a low-level culprit, has been arrested and is likely to be tried: Celia Robelo, 46, who faces a potential life sentence for what prosecutors say was a recruiting effort that earned her at most $20 in commissions.

Mr. Andrade’s story was pieced together from interviews with his family, other seamen recruited in or near his village, police officers, lawyers and aid workers in Jakarta, Manila and Singapore. It highlights the tools — debt, trickery, fear, violence, shame and family ties — used to recruit men, entrap them and leave them at sea, sometimes for years under harsh conditions.

No country exports more seafarers than the Philippines, which provides roughly a quarter of them globally. More than 400,000 Filipinos sought work last year as officers, deckhands, fishermen, cargo handlers and cruise workers. Mr. Andrade’s death shows that governments are sometimes unable or unwilling to protect the rights of citizens far from home.

The abuse of Filipino seamen has increased in recent years, labor officials in the Philippines say, because the country’s maritime trade schools produce, on average, 20,000 graduates a year for fewer than 5,000 openings. As men grow desperate for work, they take greater risks. Roughly a third of them now use agencies that are illegal — unregistered and willing to break rules, the officials said.

Such agencies, favored by ship operators and workers looking to shave costs, compound the problem of lawlessness on the high seas. Scow ships cast off stowaways and deplete fishing stocks. Violence is rampant, and few nations patrol the waters, much less enforce violations of maritime laws or international pacts.

In Manila, in late September, along a densely packed two-block stretch of sidewalk on Kalaw Avenue near the bay, hundreds of seafarers looked for work. Recruiters from Manning agencies — some legal, many not — carried signs around their necks listing job openings or pointed to brochures arrayed on tables. Fixers sold fake accreditation papers while a popular Tagalog rap song, “Seaman Lolo Ko” (“My Grandpa Is a Seaman”), boomed in the background.

“These days,” the singer, known as Yongs, rapped, “it’s the seaman getting duped.” Mariners, who used to be the cheaters (on their spouses), he warned, are now the ones cheated (by everyone else).

The Trip

In the summer of 2010, Mr. Andrade was growing restless. He had studied criminology in college in hopes of becoming a police officer, not realizing that there was a minimum height requirement of 5-foot-3. He was two inches shy. His night watchman job at a hospital paid less than 50 cents an hour. When not working in his family’s rice paddy, he spent much of his time watching cartoons on television, according to his brother Julius, 38.

When a cousin told him about possible work at sea, Mr. Andrade saw it as a chance to tour the world while earning enough money to help his family. He was introduced to Ms. Robelo, who prosecutors say was the local Step Up re-
Cruiter. She said the pay was $500 per month, in addition to a $50 allowance, his brother and mother recounted to the police.

Mr. Andrade agreed to sign up, handed over about $200 in “processing fees” and left for Manila, 220 miles north of here. He paid $318 more before flying to Singapore in September 2010. He received his plane ticket on his 31st birthday. A company representative met him at the airport and took him to Step Up’s office in Singapore’s crowded Chinatown district.

If Mr. Andrade’s experience was like those of the other Filipino men interviewed by The New York Times, he would have been told then that there had been a mistake: His pay would be less than half of what he had been expecting. And after multiple deductions, the $200 monthly wage would shrink even more.

A half-dozen other men from Mr. Andrade’s village, who prosecutors said were also recruited by Step Up, recalled in interviews that the paperwork flew by in a whirlwind of fast-moving calculations and unfamiliar terms (“passport forfeiture,” “mandatory fees,” “sideline earnings”).

First, they were required to sign a contract, they said, that typically stipulated a three-year
binding commitment, no overtime pay, no sick leave, 18- to 20-hour workdays, six-day workweeks and $50 monthly food deductions, and that granted captains full discretion to reassign crew members to other ships. Wages were to be disbursed not monthly to the workers' families but only after completion of the contract, a practice that is illegal at registered agencies.

Next, some of them signed a bill to pay for food supplies in advance; like most of the deductions, the $250 fee was kept by the agency. Then came the “promissory note,” confirming that the mariner would pay a “desertion penalty,” usually more than $1,800, if he left. The document noted that to collect their wages, crew members would have to fly back to Singapore at their own expense.

Mr. Andrade, like the other deckhands recruited by Step Up, came from a village (Linabuan Sur’s population is roughly 3,000). The men said they had never before traveled abroad, worked on the high seas, heard the term “trafficking” or dealt with a manning agency. None could explain why they might need a copy of any contract they signed as proof of a two-way agreement. They still did not know why it was troubling that a boss in a foreign country should confiscate their passports, which rendered them powerless to leave.

By that point, most of the men were deeply in debt, some more than $2,000, from recruiters’ fees, lodging expenses, health checkups, tourist visas and seamen’s books (mandatory maritime paperwork). They had borrowed from relatives, mortgaged their homes and pawned family possessions: “our one fishing boat,” “my brother’s home” and a carabao (a water buffalo), they said.

Standing on a 35-foot wooden boat late one recent night, about 40 miles from the Philippine shore, Condrad Bonihit, a friend of Mr. Andrade’s, explained why poor villagers gravitated to illegal manning agencies.

“It takes money to make money,” Mr. Bonihit said as he helped hoist a 50-foot net gyrating with anchovies. To get jobs legally requires coursework at an accredited trade school that can cost $4,000 or so, he said, far more than most villagers can afford. And the wages quoted by Step Up are often nearly double what the men might make through an accredited company.

At sea, though, the reality is different from the promises on land, Mr. Bonihit said, adding that he had lasted 10 months in the job he got through Step Up. When the once-a-week beatings of crew members became too much to bear, he left his ship in port. With help from missionaries, he flew home, he said.

“You go with pride,” he said of his experience, “come back with shame.”

Even though Mr. Andrade, Mr. Bonihit and the other Filipino men traveled to Singapore at different times over the past five years, nearly all of them described in virtually identical terms a two-bedroom apartment on the 16th floor, above Step Up’s office, where they waited before and after voyages.

As he headed toward his first job at sea, Mr. Andrade stayed in the apartment for about a week, according to family members who spoke with him briefly by phone. Pots and pans were stacked in the corners, and the walls were greasy from frying fish. The floor was so dirty that moss grew in patches, and with the windows sealed, the rooms reeked of urine and sweat, according to interviews and court records.

A short Filipino man in his 40s, known as Bong, managed the apartment for Step Up with a Chinese woman, Lina, affidavits say. New recruits were told to keep their voices down and to avoid moving around much. Some of the men were required to leave before 7 a.m. and return after dark. Others were confined to the apartment, which Bong kept locked all the time.

At night, 20 or more men lay on flattened cardboard on the floor, inches apart. If Bong pointed at you, three of the seafarers recounted, it meant you were to sleep in his room, where, they said, he demanded sex. “No was not an option,” one of the men said, because Bong controlled who got which jobs.

Mr. Andrade’s relatives say they lost track of him shortly after receiving his final text message. “Bro, this is Eril,” Mr. Andrade wrote on Sept. 15, 2010. “I am now here in Singapore I was not able to text earlier I ran out of phone credit.”

‘Total Strangers’

Established in 1988, the manning company, then known as Step Up Employment Agency, initially recruited domestic labor, providing workers for cooking, cleaning and child care jobs in Singapore. In 1995, it adopted a new name and agenda. “Supplies Philippines, China, Indonesia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Nepal, India
Reform can allow misconduct to go unchecked. Weak regulations and lax enforcement. Articles in this series examine cases while a popular tweaks. Violence is rampant, and officials said.

In Manila, in late September, a company in Manila for systematic duping men, knowingly and willing to break rules, the officials said. In the summer of 2010, Mr. Andrade’s relatives say he had lasted 10 months in Singapore to recruit through their relatives in villages back home. Ms. Robelo, for example, was brought in, even though she had no experience, by her sister-in-law, Roselyn Robelo, who had worked as a domestic helper for Mr. Lim.

After Mr. Andrade died, officials from Step Up and Hung Fei Fishery Co., the owner of the Taiwanese fishing ship he had worked on, offered to pay his family about $5,000, according to a 2012 letter from the Philippine Embassy in Singapore. (The death benefit provided to a seafarer by a legal manning agency in the Philippines is typically at least $50,000.) The family declined, instead filing a complaint against Step Up in No-
nember 2011 with Singapore’s Ministry of Man-
power. Officials at the ministry and on a govern-
ment anti-trafficking task force said last month
they were waiting for a formal request from the
Philippine government before investigating.

Police officials and prosecutors in Mr. An-
drade’s province, Aklan, voiced frustration at
what they said was a lack of response from the
federal authorities in Manila. Celso J. Hernan-
dez Jr., a lawyer with the Philippine Overseas
Employment Administration, the agency re-
ponsible for protecting Filipino workers sent
abroad, said he had no records on Mr. Andrade’s
death or on Step Up. “The illegal manning a-
geries are invisible to us,” he said. The Philippine
anti-trafficking task force did not respond to re-
quests for comment.

Taiwanese police and fishery officials said
they had no record of having questioned Shao
Chin Chung, the captain of Mr. Andrade’s ship,
about his death. The ship, Hung Yu 212, was cit-
ed for illegal fishing in 2000, 2011 and 2012, ac-
cording to the commissions that regulate tuna
fishing in the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. A sec-
retary at Hung Fei Fishery Co., based in Kaoh-
siung, Taiwan, said recently that the owner was
traveling and was not available to answer ques-
tions. Efforts to interview other crew members
were unsuccessful.

On April 6, 2011, Mr. Andrade’s cadaver ar-
rived at port in Singapore on the Hung Yu 212.
Dr. Wee Keng Poh, a forensic pathologist at Sin-
gapore’s Health Sciences Authority, conducted
an autopsy six days later. He concluded that
the cause of death was acute myocarditis, an
inflammatory disease of the heart muscle. His
report gave little more detail.

The body was then flown to the Philippines,
where Dr. Noel Martinez — the pathologist in
Kalibo, the provincial capital — performed a sec-
ond autopsy. He disagreed with the first, instead
citing a heart attack as the cause of death. Dr.
Martinez’s autopsy report also noted extensive
unexplained bruises and cuts, inflicted before
death, on Mr. Andrade’s brow, upper and lower
lip, nose, upper right chest and right armpit.

Mr. Andrade’s pancreas and one eye were
missing. The two pathologists could not be
reached, but a provincial police investigator
suggested that the organs could have been
damaged in an accident aboard the ship or re-
moved during the first autopsy. Removing an
eye is not typical in an autopsy, several patholo-
gists in New York said, adding that the pancreas
might have been missing because it sometimes
decomposes faster than other organs.

Shaking his head, Emmanuel Concepcion,
a friend of Mr. Andrade’s, said he knew what
conditions on long-haul fishing boats were like
and doubted that Mr. Andrade had died of nat-
ural causes. After being recruited by Step Up,
Mr. Concepcion also worked on a Taiwanese
tuna ship, in the South Atlantic, but quit after
the cook fatally stabbed the captain, who had
routinely beaten crew members. Asked what he
thought was the most likely cause of his friend’s
death, Mr. Concepcion said, simply, “Violence.”

‘Something You Share’

Down a dirt road, surrounded by rice padd-
dies, Ms. Robelo sat behind cinder-block walls
in a remote jail. Housing about 223 prisoners,
only 24 of them women, the five-acre Aklan
Rehabilitation Center has the feel of a bustling
shantytown. Chickens and visiting children
scurried underfoot as prisoners squatted on a
roof overlooking the courtyard.

Most of the 10 Step Up workers who have
been charged in absentia by the Philippine au-
thorities are in Singapore, and they are unlikely
to be prosecuted because there is no extradition
treaty between the countries.

Jailed since May 2013, Ms. Robelo cried
while explaining what had led to her arrest.

“When I got a name,” she said, “I called it
to Singapore.” She never met or spoke directly
with any of the Lims, she said; she communi-
cated only with her sister-in-law in Singapore.

Before Mr. Andrade’s death, she said, she
never heard from the men prosecutors say she re-
cruited, some of them her relatives, about what
happened in Singapore or at sea. She said she
had signed up only three men, not 10, as pros-
ecutors charge.

“If no one has work, a job is something you
share,” Ms. Robelo said, adding that she saw
her role as “helping the boys,” not officially re-
cruiting them. She said she had been told that
the $2 promised (but never paid) for each per-
son she referred was not a commission but in-
tended to offset the cost of driving to the men’s
houses for paperwork.

Visiting the jail, her husband, Mitchell, 44,
and children — Xavier, 9, and Gazrelle, 7 —
stood nearby. Mr. Robelo has been unemployed since he sold his auto rickshaw to raise $2,800 to pay his wife's first lawyer, who, the couple said, took the money and disappeared without doing any work.

In Kalibo, a prosecutor, Reynaldo B. Peralta Jr., said the local police had not interviewed other crew members from Mr. Andrade's ship about how he died because they were elsewhere in the Philippines, beyond Mr. Peralta’s jurisdiction.

“Were it not for her recruitment,” Mr. Peralta said of Ms. Robelo, “these victims would not have left the country.” Ms. Robelo knew she was recruiting illegally, he claimed, because some villagers gave her money to send to Singapore.

Back in the village, hidden behind a thicket of banana trees, the empty metal lining from Mr. Andrade’s coffin sat alongside the now-abandoned house that he had hoped to repair. A half-dozen unpaid electric bills were wedged into the cracked front door, addressed to his mother, Molina, who died in 2013 from liver failure. Inside, water dripped through the ceiling.

Julius, Mr. Andrade’s brother, said that unless officials in Manila got more involved, he did not believe he would ever get justice for his brother’s death. “It’s not right,” he said of Ms. Robelo’s incarceration. The real culprits who should be in jail, he added, are in Singapore and at sea.

Susan Beachy contributed research from New York.
Iraqis Retake Center of City
In Grip of ISIS
A Victory in Ramadi Could Prove Pivotal

BY CHOE SANG-HUN
SEOUL, South Korea — More than 70 years after the end of World War II, South Korea faces the possibility of military conflict on its southern border with North Korea. The South Korean government has announced that it will increase its military spending by 20 percent in 2016, and the United States has deployed additional troops to the region. The situation is particularly tense as North Korea continues to conduct nuclear and missile tests, and South Korea is preparing for a potential invasion.

Motörhead Frontman Is Dead
December 29, 2015

Ian Fraser Kilmister, the jagged-voiced singer and bassist known as Lemmy, was 70. PAGE A16

Motörhead was formed in London in 1975 and became one of the most influential bands in the heavy metal genre. Lemmy was the band’s founder and lead vocalist, and his distinctive voice and stage presence helped define the sound of the group. Lemmy was known for his outspoken personality and his love of rock and roll, and he was a beloved figure in the music world. He died on Christmas Day at a hospital in London.

A Deadly Conflict in the African Nation
Near the end of a 50-year political campaign, Governor Off the Grid

Governor Off the Grid

A deadly conflict in the African nation could prove pivotal.

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Maritime ‘Repo Men’: A Last Resort for Stolen or Seized Ships

Max Hardberger, a maritime “repo man,” center; his longtime fixer, Oge Cadet, in red; and a hired rower get a closer look at ships in Miragoâne, Haiti, by pretending to be potential buyers.

The Outlaw Ocean

Articles in this series are examining lawlessness at sea.

ONLINE: Previous articles in the series, and related coverage:
nytimes.com/oceans

From Page A1

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A reviewer of contracts and court records from some of these extraction requests, Mr. Hardberger said, he has a collection of fake official documents, auditors, uniforms and official-sounding business cards. Even his glass vial ofRegExp—Referring to Haiti’s ports and legal system—has its “face washed.”

“I add a little here, a little there,” Mr. Hardberger said, “creating new corrupt organizations at sea.”

“You can steal, seize, extort and recover ships,” Mr. Hardberger said, “and sometimes less sympathetic to America in such a case in the Abacos, a chain of islands in the Bahamas, in 2012. The owners paid a local witch doctor $100 to perform a binding rite. Mr. Hardberger said the locals then told him they had burned his boat and that he should return when it was finished. McClain, the specialist in maritime repossessions, said ships are often detained by local port authorities seeking a bribe.

Douglas Lindsay, the lead partner with Maritime Realties, a recovery firm based in New York, the rightful owner can later challenge the repossession.

About 10 miles west of Haiti’s capital, in Scarborough, the crew of a private yacht was interrupted in its search for the sails that had been stolen from a smaller boat anchored at a marina. They were about to approach their sailboat, the Maya Express, which had been improperly detained in the Port of St.-Marc, Haiti, to the Bahamas, where a judge upheld an arrest

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‘Repo Men’ of the High Seas

A Last Resort for Owners of Stolen or Seized Ships

By IAN URBINA

IN Greece, Max Hardberger posed as an interested buyer, in Haiti as a port official, in Trinidad, a shipper. He has plied guards with booze and distracted them with prostitutes; spooked port police officers with witch doctors and duped night watchmen into leaving their posts. His goal: to get on board a vessel he is trying to retrieve and race toward the 12-mile line where the high seas begin and local jurisdiction ends.

Mr. Hardberger is among a handful of maritime “repo men” who handle the toughest of grab-and-dash jobs in foreign harbors, usually on behalf of banks, insurers or shipowners. A last-resort solution to a common predicament, he is called when a vessel has been stolen, its operators have defaulted on their mortgage or a ship has been fraudulently detained by local officials.

“When we show up, things go missing,” said Mr. Hardberger.

Tens of thousands of boats or ships are stolen around the world each year, and many become part of a global “phantom fleet” involved in a broad range of crimes. Phantom vessels are frequently used in Southeast Asia for human trafficking, piracy and illegal fishing, in the Caribbean for smuggling guns and drugs, and in the Middle East and North Africa to transport fighters or circumvent arms or oil embargoes, according to Rear Adm. Christopher Parry, a maritime security expert formerly with Britain’s Royal Navy.

Usually the vessels are not recovered because they are difficult to find on the vast oceans, the search is too expensive and the ships often end up in ports with uncooperative or corrupt officials.

But sometimes, when the boat or ship is more valuable, firms like Mr. Hardberger’s Vessel Extractions in New Orleans are hired to find it. His company occasionally handles jobs involving megayachts, but more often the targets are small-to-medium cargo ships that carry goods between developing countries with poor or unstable governments.

To the local port authorities and law enforcement officials in foreign countries, Mr. Hardberger and his ilk are vigilantes who erode the rule of law in places that are struggling to establish it. “They deserve to be arrested,” Louhandy Brizard, 27, a Haitian Coast Guard officer, said about repo men during a sea patrol looking for stolen boats.

Charles N. Dragonette, who monitored maritime crime for the United States Office of Naval Intelligence until 2012, said that he believes that Mr. Hardberger follows whatever rules exist. But, he added, “I do worry about how these guys undercut local authorities, embarrassing them by stealing ships from under their noses, and worsening the overall corruption problem by paying bribes to local helpers to pull off these heists.”

Most recoveries of stolen boats and maritime repossessions are ho-hum affairs, typically involving paperwork and banks working with local law enforcement. But when negotiations fail, waterborne jailbreaks sometimes occur.

Charles Meacham, a maritime repo man based in Jacksonville, Fl., recounted how his teams spirited hundreds of boats out of a marina in Mexico in 2009 after they were stolen from...
Max Hardberger, a maritime “repo man,” center; his longtime fixer, Oge Cadet, in red; and a hired rower got a closer look at ships in Miragoâne, Haiti, by pretending to be potential buyers.

Florida by a drug cartel, a move that won him a bounty on his head. Court papers describe a job that Mr. Hardberger handled in 2009, where he retrieved a freighter called the Virgin Express I from the Dominican Republic, boarding it by pretending to be a shipper, then sailing the ship to the Turks and Caicos Islands, where he handed it over to the mortgage holder.

Citing past assignments in Cuba, Egypt, Ghana, Honduras, Trinidad, Venezuela and elsewhere, Mr. Meacham and a half dozen others in the industry said that they each get on average one or two “extraction” requests per year. John Dalby, chief executive officer of Marine Risk Management, said his firm is currently working for a consortium of banks to repossess a fleet of more than a dozen freighters from nearly as many ports around the world. “They have to be taken all at once or else several will run,” he said.

A review of contracts and court records from some of these extraction jobs and interviews with repo men, insurance investigators and coast guard officers show that lawlessness offshore sometimes extends from corruption onshore. These documents and comments shed light on the array of ploys used to steal, seize, extort and recover ships. They also reveal how maritime repo men — and the scheming debtors, dodgy port mechanics, testy guards, disgruntled crews and dishonest port officials that they are hired to outwit — take advantage of the lack of policing and jurisdictional ambiguity of the open ocean.

The public perception of modern piracy usually involves Somalis in fast-boats capturing tankers on the high seas. “More often overlooked but just as prevalent is white-collar piracy,” Admiral Parry said. Buccaneers in business suits hijack ships in port through opportunistic ruses rather than at sea with surprise shows of force.

Consumers are affected by the theft and corruption because it adds millions of dollars to transport costs and insurance rates, raising sticker prices more than 10 percent, maritime researchers say.
Mr. Hardberger inspected a map while on a patrol with the Haitian Coast Guard.

Most corrupt detentions in port consist of “squeeze and release” bilking schemes intended to get bribes, said Douglas Lindsay, the lead partner with Maritime Resolve, a recovery firm based in England. “But squeeze long enough and you strangle,” Mr. Lindsay said. Shipping businesses can go bankrupt as cargo spoils, delivery deadlines pass and owed wages accumulate.

“The fact is that in some ports in the world possession isn’t, as the saying goes, nine tenths of the law,” added Mr. Dragonette. “It is the law.”

Ship Raiders and Port Pirates

Port scams are as old as shipping itself and seasoned repo men can identify them by name. “Unexpected complications”: a shipyard makes repairs without permission, then sends the owner an astronomical bill, often for more than the value of the ship, hoping to force its forfeiture. “Barratry”: buying off crews, sometimes paying more than a year’s wages to leave a ship’s keys and walk away. “A docking play”: a shipowner defaults on his mortgage, but is in cahoots with a marina, which charges the repossession hyperinflated docking fees. “I swam out to it one night and took the boat back,” said Steve Salem, a repo man in Sarasota, Fla., recalling one such case in the Abacos, a chain of islands in the Bahamas, in 2012.

Mr. Lindsay described a “classic shake-down” case he handled in 2011 in Guinea in West Africa where a ship was being fraudulently detained with a $50 million fine for less than $10,000 in damage to a dock. “They fly you in, you find the right official, and negotiate him back to Planet Earth,” Mr. Lindsay said.

Stolen boats — about 5,000 were taken in the United States in 2014 — are often relocated to “unfriendly jurisdictions,” where local governments are sometimes less sympathetic to American owners and more susceptible to bribes, the repo men said.

Mr. Meacham, the Florida-based repo man, said he was once sent to Havana to retrieve a stolen American-owned megayacht being used by a hotel there. Chartering the vessel into international waters, he then told the Cuban captain:
Douglas Lindsay, the lead partner with Maritime Resolve, a recovery firm based in England, said ships are often detained by port officials seeking a bribe.

Come with us to the United States or take a lifeboat back to shore. The captain chose the former.

John Lightbown, the general manager of a Florida shipping company, said that in some places criminals can seize a $2 million ship for $2,000. “No evidence, no invoices, no affidavits, no appeals process,” said Mr. Lightbown, who has hired Mr. Hardberger several times. “They just need the filing fee that goes to a local justice of the peace and something extra under the table.”

To talk his way on board, Mr. Hardberger said he has a collection of fake uniforms and official-sounding business cards, among them are “Port Inspector,” “Marine Surveyor” and “Internal Auditor.” He also carries a glass vial of magnetic powder to sprinkle on the hull to reveal lettering that has been welded off.

Mr. Dalby, from Marine Risk Management, said that rather than taking ships from unfriendly ports, he prefers surreptitiously placing GPS trackers on them while in transit, then calling in the police.

“Occasionally the legal system solves the problem,” added Mr. Hardberger, who canceled plans for an extraction job this month after a court in Haiti ordered the release of a freighter called the Amber Express, which had been improperly detained in the Port of St.-Marc, Haiti.

All of the repo men said they abide by certain self-imposed rules. No violence or weapons — better, they said, to hire street youths for lookouts, bar owners for diversions, and prostitutes to talk their way on board to spy.

Officially from the Haitian Coast Guard, Interpol, and the bar association in California, where Mr. Hardberger is licensed, said they had no records of complaints, disciplinary actions or arrest warrants for him.

Asked whether he ever pays off public officials, Mr. Meacham replied in much the same way as his colleagues had. “Bribery is illegal,” he said. “Negotiating a fine is not.”

**Toil and Trouble**

Often, maritime law works in crooks’ favor, said Michael Bono, a lawyer and managing director of Vessel Extractions. Ship sales are more anonymous and final than sales of other types of property, he said. If someone buys a stolen painting at an auction, explained Edward Keane, a maritime lawyer in New York, the rightful owner can later make a claim and in many cases repossess it. But under international maritime law, he said, a vessel sold at a judicial auction has had its “face washed” or “bottom scrubbed” clean of liens and other previous debts, including mortgages.

About 50 miles west of Haiti’s capital, in Miragoâne, known as a pirate’s paradise, Mr. Hardberger explained that giving a stolen boat a fast makeover requires little more than “about $300, four welders, and a fax machine.”

Joined by his longtime local fixer, Oge Cadet, Mr. Hardberger, 67, crossed the harbor in a rowboat while they prospected a strip of beach where they hope to build a dock to chop up old ships for scrap. Mr. Cadet recounted an extraction job here in 2004. An American businessman had bribed local judicial officials to seize a 10-story-tall car carrier called the Maya Express and sell the ship to him in a rigged auction, according to court records.

To scare guards away, Mr. Hardberger paid a local witch doctor $100 to publicly put a curse on the one place in town with cellphone reception. Though the glare from a blowtorch used by Mr. Hardberger’s team to cut through the ship’s anchor chains almost got them caught, they successfully sailed the ship to the Bahamas, where a judge upheld the repossession.

Referring to Haiti’s ports and legal system, Justice John Lyons of the Bahamas wrote that “cronyism and corruption are the order of the day.”