

## **Focus-Stowaways find death on high seas**

LONDON () - When Ghanaian Kingsley Ofusu stepped ashore in the French port of Le Havre one October morning, he carried a pocket of coffee beans from the ship's cargo and the image of his brother's murder fresh in his mind.

"When at last they came for me and my brother, Alberto, we knew something was wrong," Ofusu was reported as telling a French court. "The ship's officer had a pistol and another man had an iron bar, and there was blood on their shirts."

It is rare that cases like the murder of Alberto Ofusu and seven of his comrades on the MC Ruby in 1995 reach the courts, but many fear that the killing continues far out at sea, out of sight of the law.

"What you've seen in the courts and in the papers is just the tip of the iceberg," said John Morrison, a human rights campaigner who once tracked the journeys of 28 stowaways for a British Refugee Council report.

Caught between an ever growing tide of asylum seekers on the one side and a barrage of fines from the ports at which they arrive on the other, some crews see murder as a practical solution.

The French court that sentenced the MC Ruby's Ukrainian captain and first mate to life imprisonment was told by the steward Oleg Mikhailevsky who "just obeyed orders" that he cried and vomited as he executed Alberto Ofusu, Lloyd's List reported.

"They're not real people," the first mate told him. "Don't be scared, it happens on every ship. We'll be thanked in Europe."

### **UNITED NATIONS ACTS**

This month, the United Nations announced a new set of maritime regulations to protect stowaways, largely by preventing them from boarding ships in the first place.

And it went further, saying: "The new standards...reinforce the right of stowaways that do slip through the net to fair and humane treatment."

But experts said the problem lay not with laws at sea, which are difficult to enforce, but with legislation on land, which hits ships and aircraft with hefty fines for any stowaways found on arrival.

"The MC Ruby had been fined for four stowaways on a previous voyage, and the money was docked from the crews' wages," Morrison told Reuters.

"They understood what the ship's owner was trying to say, and they didn't want that to happen again. It shows that these fines are contributing to stowaway deaths."

### **BRITAIN IN THE DOCK**

In May 1996, a crew of Filipinos slipped ashore in Canada from the container ship Maersk

Dubai. They brought with them a Romanian stowaway whom they had hidden from the ship's Taiwanese officers, and the tale of another who had not been so lucky.

They alleged that the officers had hunted him down, stabbed him to death, and like two stowaways on an earlier journey, his body had been ditched in the sea.

Morrison also tells of rough justice when stowaways are found by crews preparing to sail from West Africa, again fuelled by the fear of fines upon arriving in Europe.

Britain last year dished out 14 million pounds of fines to transport companies caught with asylum seekers on their ships, trucks and trains. Some lorry drivers were fined as much as 80,000 pounds on a single journey.

Though overturned by the High Court in December, the government is currently appealing, and the fines could soon be back in place.

Morrison said the outcome was important for lorry drivers, but all that would help the stowaways was action at the Court of Human Rights. He added: "In terms of stowaways, no-one really gives a damn."

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**Source:** Reuters