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Clearing the haze around Iran Deyanat

How did a non-descript bulk carrier bound for Rotterdam and seized by pirates find itself at the centre of a political storm? Neville Smith met with its charter-operator to find out why it courts so much controversy

IT IS a bright, cold afternoon in Rotterdam as we wait for the tender to take us out to *Iran Deyanat*. On the pontoon, the boat crews and stevedores pay little attention to the two men who look out of place in the winter sunlight.

I am here with Thomas Poetzsch of G Hinrichs, *Iran Deyanat's* charter-operator to go aboard and have a look around, talk to surveyors and the master and witness the unloading operations that began two days ago.

Clugging across the dark water of the Waalhaven, the bulk carrier comes into view, sitting midstream, two floating cranes attending its cargo holds. The swan-neck gantries move gracefully through the air, swinging load after load of 'big bags' from the ship's hold into the waiting river barges.

It is a scene so common as to be totally unremarkable amid the perpetual motion of Rotterdam's inner harbour. The cranes have been working almost since the ship's arrival and will work through the night and into the next week. *Iran Deyanat's* cargo is long overdue.

Climbing the greasy rope ladder to the rail, the ship seems a robust enough proposition. Old, certainly at 25 years, but wearing its age pretty well at first glance. In the holds, gangs are swarming around the cargo bags, attaching the spreader and giving the crane driver the thumbs up.

Walking the deck, we meet AC van der IJhoek, employed to survey the cargo holds on Hinrichs' behalf. "It's all looking good," he tells us, beyond some difficulties with the hatch covers. "There's nothing special, no problems with the cargo that we have found."

On arrival, the ship had seen some rather more

unusual visitors: 40-50 members of the port authority, port police and customs swarmed the ship, searching it from engine room to accommodation. A 'gas doctor' had been on board too, measuring oxygen levels in the holds, giving each the greenlight for official inspection. Only when declared 'safe' was the ship allowed to begin unloading.

Despite its innocuous appearance, *Iran Deyanat* is no an ordinary bulk carrier. The ship set sail from Nanjing at the end of July, loaded with industrial products — bauxite, alumina, coke, steel, feedstuffs among them — for Rotterdam, via Suez. The normality ended on August 21 when the pirates took control, only to begin falling mysteriously ill, reporting sickness and hair loss. Some reports describe the bodies of dead pirates being offloaded in villages around the city of Eyl.

What happened next is still the subject of debate. According to the neo-conservative and right-wing US weblogs that are the primary source of this phase of the journey, the pirates took control, only to begin falling mysteriously ill, reporting sickness and hair loss. Some reports describe the bodies of dead pirates being offloaded in villages around the city of Eyl.

The same blogs reported that the pirates found weapons onboard and demanded access to the cargo holds but were told the crew 'lacked access codes to the containers'. Add together these two 'facts' and the conclusion was simple: *Iran Deyanat* was a dirty boat.

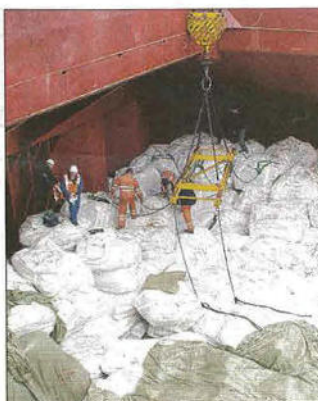
Owned by Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines, *Iran Deyanat* is among the assets the US state department believes Iran uses to practise proliferation of fissionable materials. As recently as September 10, the US Department of the Treasury designated IRISL, and 18 of its subsidiaries 'of proliferation concern'.

A statement on the website of the US Department of State said: "We are concerned that IRISL is using its global transportation system to ship items of proliferation concern to Iran in circumvention of United Nations Security Council resolutions."

Even with the ship still under the pirates' control, the plot twisted and turned. Ransom negotiations began, with initial discussions around \$2m for release. Then, the blogs claim, the US offered \$7m to take control of the ship and secure the risk.

Capt Poetzsch has heard all these stories and more. As charterer, he has a commercial relationship with IRISL stretching back eight years. He is no stranger to the scrutiny that comes to dealing with one horn of President George W Bush's axis of evil.

A thoughtful former master with many years sailing for Hansa Line, he invited Lloyd's List to see the ship and judge for itself. Clearly there are commercial considerations: his customers have heard the stories too and want reassurance that it is safe to take delivery of their parcels.



Inspection: a 'gas doctor' had to declare the ship's holds were safe before unloading could begin.

Talking the next day in the office of his agent Rheintrais, I ask why he works with IRISL when there are hundreds of owners, which would willingly take the business.

The solution lies in part in Hinrichs' history. Starting as a forwarder, it has a reputation for offering transport solutions of which shipping has grown to be dominant. Hinrichs' China-Europe cargoes are a specialised bulk and bag parcel service operating with near-liner like regularity for the same end-users. The company will bring 36 vessels from 2m tonnes in 60-80 separate parcels each time.

"When you have 60-80 buyers working with suppliers in China to get 70,000 tonnes together at a certain time to fill a panamax then you need a real forward plan," he said.

In IRISL, he has a partner with regular cargoes of iron ore and sulphur from the Middle East Gulf to China with no backhaul. "When they fix a cargo to China then it gives me four or five weeks and if I fix with them, it takes away their headache for another four months. We are then able to offer our customers a named ship, the rate and a reliable schedule."

Hinrichs does fix some spot tonnage but Capt Poetzsch says the number of parcels means some owners are worried they could be exposed to myriad individual claims, through his agreement with IRISL, indemnifies them from such risks.

The deal makes for a concept that is not easily transferrable but Capt Poetzsch is keen to stress that Hinrichs has no direct trade with Iran itself and is not a sanctions-buster.

"Everything we do is legally correct and morally I have absolutely no problem with it," he said.

This is not his first brush with controversy or the attentions of the spooks. Some years ago, Hinrichs was contacted when another IRISL vessel *Iran Sharay* loaded magnesite in North Korea for Europe just as tension flared over Iran's threat to develop medium-range rockets to target Europe and the US.

"They had information that there was rocket fuel from North Korea for Iran onboard. I was told it was 500 kilos fuel additive. It was absurd. Instead of flying a cargo plane to Iran, you put it through the busiest shipping lane in the world?" After following live satel-

lite pictures the ship was detained in Rotterdam and every single screw was surveyed. Nothing came out. For me that was kind of official clearance. We know we are observed and they are always welcome."

Back on the ship we meet the master, Hassanali Nejad, who took command at Salsalah when the bulk of the crew were changed and repatriated. Quiet and cautious, his knowledge of the hijack is secondhand and he clearly has no desire to speak out of turn about a delicate political situation.

IRISL has refused an in-depth interview on the hijack for fear of reprisals.

He was told that at first the pirates were loud and nervous. "At the beginning they were shouting 'go here, do that, pointing guns. They said the crew could not do anything apart from cook for them. Later on, they did not disturb them so much and they could work in the engine room and on deck. They had different moods."

There were usually around 20 hijackers onboard during the 50 days the ship was held off the coast. "They would go and come back after a few days with food. The food was running out so they brought rice and drinking water."

He said his predecessor told him that none of the pirates became ill and denies the ship berthed anywhere after leaving China or after being released, something confirmed by movements reported to Lloyd's MLU.

Making its way out of the Indian Ocean in bad weather, the ship's low freeboard and slow speed merely made it a tempting target.

Another part of the bloggers' story was that hijackers sought access to the 'cargo containers' but were denied by the crew who did not have the access codes. Capt Nejad was told the pirates "were not interested even to look at the cargo". Had they insisted, they could have used the access ladders, though the oxygen in the holds would have degraded enough to cause almost instant asphyxiation.

At the time of the hijack, director of the East African Seafarers' Assistance Programme Andrew Mwangura was reported as saying that some of the pirates had died and there was "something very wrong" about *Iran Deyanat*.

Mr Mwangura says now that the source of his information at the time was local villagers and asked by Lloyd's List if seafarers had complained of the illness that affected the pirates, he said SAP was "...informed that the crew were not affected. It is said that there is physical evidence of the illness."

The next day, we visit the ship again with another of the cargo owners. An agribulk trader, he is met by his own surveyors who have swept the cargo of corn gluten with geiger counters, finding no radiation.

When the ship was hijacked, IRISL declared General Average meaning that the cargo owners had to contribute towards covering the ransom expenses, something Capt Poetzsch said they had done to finally take delivery of their cargoes.

The weather has worsened but cargo operations continue and the agent is keen to maintain the momentum. The cranes are needed on the next job but the crew is struggling to open the worn hatch covers on numbers two and seven. The repair shop is attending but the owners are reluctant to spend money, so several frustrating hours pass before the crew agree to use the cranes if necessary to keep the cargo moving. Barges and coasters standing by are already running on demurrage.

As we board the tender for the journey back, the ship rides low by the stern, an oblong mass in the drizzle. And it dawns that what began as a tale worthy of James Bond — Iranian ships, Chinese cargo, Somali pirates, security raids by port police — is ending as an everyday shipping story of delays and demurrage claims and failing machinery.

As for the Hinrichs cargoes, the next one will come to Rotterdam around the Cape of Good Hope. Not, Capt Poetzsch said, because of the piracy risk but because in the current market, it was simply cheaper.



"Everything we do is legally correct and morally I have absolutely no problem with it"

Thomas Poetzsch, Hinrichs