Rats, Waves, Forced Labor: A Reporter’s Life on the Lawless Ocean

Migrant fisherman working at night on a Thai boat.

By Ian Urbina (Retrieved July 27, 2015 10:06 am)

For five weeks last year Adam Dean, a photographer, and I reported on fishing boats in the South China Sea and in Thai, Malaysian and Indonesian port towns for a story about forced labor in the fishing industry.

Our goal was to get as far from shore as possible onto the long haul boats, which are becoming more common globally as the number of fish near land dwindles. These boats are virtually never accessed by outsiders and, as a result, they are reputed to have more extreme working conditions.

Getting onto these boats was not easy. Most of the fishermen at the wharves we visited declined to take us on board. The only ones who would consider it refused to allow us to embark at port. No one wants to be seen shuttling foreigners out to sea, they explained; the industry has a bad enough reputation already.

Eventually we got where we needed to go — nearly a hundred miles off the coast of Thailand — by hopscotching from boat to boat. One captain took us several dozen miles out. He radioed another friendly captain who took us out farther. And so on.

The captain who took us on the first leg of our trip agreed to let us on board as long as we promised to keep out of the crew’s way. The ship was a purse seiner (as opposed to a bottom trawler), which means it uses large nets to trap schools of mostly small, forage fish to be used in pet food and livestock feed.
The majority of Thai-flagged vessels in the South China Sea are worked by migrants who are trafficked illegally into the country. The cost of their trip becomes a debt that is sold to ship captains. Migrants typically stay on board the fishing boats, often against their will, until they have repaid their debts.

The purse seiner boat was dirty — and dangerous. The air inside smelled of diesel fumes and fish innards. Roaches scurried everywhere. When the ship pitched, the possibility of slipping and falling overboard was a deadly reality. An especially unfriendly dog took a particular disliking to us. Patrolling the middle deck, she lunged and snarled whenever we neared the wheelhouse.

Communicating with the crew was a lot like playing charades. Few of the men spoke English. Our translator split her time between Adam and me until she fell severely seasick after we hit choppy water, at which point she vomited whenever she tried to stand up.

Meals presented a reporting dilemma. We risked offending our hosts — and a chance to bond with them — if we declined the food they offered. On the other hand, partaking in their barely boiled squid and rice was an intestinal gamble.

Around 2 a.m. there came a lull in work, and virtually the entire crew disappeared into a tight room with a low ceiling maybe four feet from the floor. The men climbed into cramped, cocoon-like hammocks made of fishing nets and suspended from above. Adam and I guessed that the men preferred the hammocks because they swayed, soothingly like cradles, rolling with the ship. Having not slept for 48 hours, we decided to spread out on the floor.

We lay down under a hammock and went to sleep. I was awakened soon after by a jolt of adrenaline and the sickening sensation that a small creature was scampering up my leg. Trying to sit up, I slammed my head into the back of the man above me. My headlamp fell to the floor, turned on, and illuminated the dozens of rats that were scurrying across the floor. Some busied themselves cleaning the crew’s half-empty bowls; others looked like rioters looting stores as they darted in and out of crew duffel bags.
We moved outside to the upper deck, perched Indian-style, on top of a fish barrel and tried to sleep. We were awakened two hours later — at about 5 a.m. — when the captain blasted an air horn next to our perch. A few moments later, the crew was back on deck, spreading out their hammocks for the next netting.