

Yemen's Huthis say freed detained ship's crew after Gaza truce

AFP – Yemen's Huthi rebels on Wednesday freed the crew of the merchant ship Galaxy Leader after detaining them for more than a year, citing the ceasefire in Gaza between Israel and Hamas as motivation.

Weeks after the war in the Gaza Strip broke out on October 7, 2023, the Iran-backed Huthis began launching attacks on shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden in what they said was support for the Palestinians.

At the start of their campaign, helicopter-borne rebels stormed the vehicle carrier Galaxy Leader and detained its 25 international crew.

On Wednesday, the Huthi supreme council "announced the freeing of the crew of the Galaxy Leader, who were arrested on November 19, 2023 during the campaign in solidarity with Gaza", the rebels' Saba news agency said.

It added that the release came "in support of the ceasefire" in the Palestinian territory, which began on Sunday.

Saba said the crew were freed with the help of the Gulf sultanate of Oman.

At a press conference held on the tarmac surrounded by the 25 crew members, a Hamas official hailed the "coordination" between his group and the Huthis that led to the crew's release, according to footage aired by the rebel-affiliated Al-Masirah TV channel.

Oman's foreign ministry later confirmed that the crew – comprising the Bulgarian captain and second-in-command, 17 Filipinos, and a handful of Ukrainian, Romanian and Mexican

sailors – had flown from Sanaa to Muscat aboard an Omani air force plane.

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos confirmed the release of the Filipinos who were detained, adding that they are now under the care of Manila's Embassy in Oman.

"It is with utmost joy that, after more than a year of captivity in Yemen, I announce the safe release of all seventeen Filipino seafarers, together with the rest of the crewmembers of M/V Galaxy Leader," Marcos said in a statement.

Bulgaria's foreign ministry said Wednesday that "Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov dispatched the government plane" to bring their two citizens back home.

– 'Heartwarming news' –

UN special envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg called the release of the crew "heartwarming news".

He also urged the Huthis to end "all maritime attacks".

International Maritime Organization chief Arsenio Dominguez said in a statement that it was "a moment of profound relief for all of us – not only for the crew and their families, but also to the wider maritime community".

Dominguez, whose UN agency deals with shipping security, called the release a testament to "diplomacy and dialogue, recognising innocent seafarers must not become collateral victims in wider geopolitical tensions".

Among the ships targeted by the Huthis were vessels the rebels believed were linked to Israel, the United States and the United Kingdom.

The Bahamas-flagged, British-owned Galaxy Leader is operated by a Japanese firm but has links to Israeli businessman Abraham "Rami" Ungar.

The rebels later opened the ship as an attraction for Yemeni tourists who were invited to visit the captured vessel, which was by then flying Yemeni and Palestinian flags, off the rebel-held province of Hodeida.

Part of Iran's "axis of resistance", the Huthis have also repeatedly launched missiles and drones at Israel since the Gaza war began with Hamas's 2023 attack.

On Tuesday, they said that during the Gaza ceasefire they would limit their attacks to vessels linked to Israel.

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