

# International

The New York Times

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 19, 2009

## Russia Says Ship's Hijackers Were Taken Without a Shot

By MICHAEL SCHWIRTZ

MOSCOW — The Russian Defense Ministry said Tuesday that the cargo ship Arctic Sea, which seemed to vanish without a trace off of Portugal last month, prompting fears of piracy in Europe, had been hijacked as it traversed the Baltic Sea.

The crew of a Russian antisubmarine ship intercepted the Arctic Sea and freed its 15 Russian crew members 300 miles from the Cape Verde Islands in the open Atlantic on Monday, capturing the eight hijackers without firing a shot, Defense Minister Anatoly E. Serdyukov said Tuesday, according to the Kremlin Web site. The hijackers were identified only by their nationalities: four Estonians, two Latvians and two Russians.

The Defense Ministry said the hijackers had commandeered the ship off the coast of Sweden and traveled for several days through heavily monitored European waters to the open Atlantic without detection, in what would be an act of piracy practically unknown in modern Europe.

While clearing up some issues, the ministry statement left many questions unanswered:

Why would hijackers seize a small freighter carrying only about \$2 million in timber? Were they actually seeking something of greater value, like drugs or nuclear materials? Why was it first reported that armed men had boarded the vessel in the Baltic Sea, bound and beaten the crew, and then simply left?

The Russian government has released neither photos nor video of the crew or the ship since the rescue. The only details have come from Mr. Serdyukov, though the Malta Maritime Authority, under whose flag the Arctic Sea was flying, confirmed on Tuesday that the Russian Navy had found the vessel and arrested the eight men. The authority also said that it had been tracking the ship for several days.

Viktor Matveyev, director of Solchart, the ship's Finland-based operator, refused to give any details of the vessel's seizure or rescue, saying he did not want to harm the investigation. But the

ship's insurer, Renaissance Insurance in Moscow, confirmed that it had received a ransom demand of \$1.5 million on Aug. 3, Bloomberg News said Tuesday.

Beyond questions of motive, there is the issue of actually pulling off such a brazen crime.

What has become common in certain waters of Africa and Asia is rare in Europe, where a crew under attack can alert police officers who are never that far away, said Ulla Tapaninen of the Center for Maritime Studies at the University of Turku in Finland.

The Arctic Sea's captain apparently contacted his bosses at Solchart on July 24, Mr. Matveyev said last week. The captain reportedly said that armed men in police uniforms overtook the Arctic Sea in a small boat and boarded it about 12 hours earlier, ostensibly to look for drugs.

On Tuesday, Mr. Serdyukov said the hijackers had told the crew that they were having boat trouble and asked to come aboard. Once on the ship, they bound and blindfolded the crew members, beating some severely, the captain reportedly said.

When he radioed headquarters about the armed men, the captain said that they had already left the ship, though it appears now that they remained on board. The ship then continued along from the Baltic Sea to the Strait of Dover between France and England.

Once there, the ship radioed the British Coast Guard, as required by European maritime law, and was waved past to continue through the English Channel. The coast guard was not notified of any problem with the ship, said Kaimes Beasley, a British Coast Guard official assigned to the channel.

Once through the strait the hijackers ordered the crew members to switch off their navigation and communication equipment and head into the Atlantic toward Africa, Mr. Serdyukov said.

In a statement on Tuesday, the Malta Maritime Authority said that maritime officials had actually been tracking the vessel for several days but decided for security reasons not to disclose any information.