

Russia gives details on hijacking of cargo ship

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But citing risk to inquiry, officials refuse to talk much about the case

BY MICHAEL SCHWIRTZ

Partly unraveling a maritime mystery, the Russian Defense Ministry said Tuesday that the cargo ship Arctic Sea, which had seemed to vanish without a trace off Portugal, was hijacked last month by eight men as it traversed the Baltic Sea.

But instead of clearing up the mystery, the disclosure was quickly enveloped in a fog of new questions. Neither any photograph nor video of the crew or the ship was released. The only details about the rescue came from Defense Minister Anatoly E. Serdyukov.

"Any commentary now might harm the investigation," said Viktor Matveyev, director of Solchart, which operates the ship and is based in Finland. He refused to give details.

According the Kremlin's Web site, the crew of the Russian anti-submarine ship Ladny freed the Arctic Sea's 15 crew members, all Russians, in the open Atlantic on Monday, arresting the hijackers without firing a shot. The hijackers were identified only by their nationalities: four Estonians, two Latvians and two Russians.

They supposedly commandeered the ship off the coast of Sweden and traveled through heavily monitored European waters without being detected. It is still not clear why the hijackers would even choose the Arctic Sea, which officially was only carrying about \$2 million in lumber, a relatively low-value cargo in that part of the world.

And then there is the issue of actually pulling off such a crime.

"In African waters or Asian waters, this is not very strange, but in Europe this rarely happens because you can call the police and can be easily rescued," said Ulla Tapaninen, a maritime expert at the Center for Maritime Studies at the University of Turku, in Finland.

But the Arctic Sea's captain did contact Solchart on July 24, about 12 hours after the hijackers came aboard, Mr. Matveyev, the company director, said last week. At the time, the captain said the armed men, wearing police uniforms, had overtaken the Arctic Sea in a small boat and boarded it, ostensibly to look for drugs. Once on the ship, they bound and blindfolded the crew, beating some of them severely.

On Tuesday, Mr. Serdyukov, the defense minister, said the hijackers had told the crew that they were having trouble with their boat and asked to come aboard.

For reasons yet unknown, the captain radioed that the armed men had left the ship after 12 hours, though it appears now that they remained on board. Once in the Atlantic, the hijackers ordered the crew to switch off their navigation and communication equipment and head into the Atlantic toward Africa, Mr. Serdyukov said.

The Malta Maritime Authority said Tuesday that officials had actually been tracking the vessel for several days even though it was reported as missing. The deception was carried out by the investigating authorities of Finland, Malta and Sweden "in order not to jeopardize the life and safety of the persons on board and the integrity of the ship," it said.