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French Court Sentences Russia-Linked Tanker Captain to 1 Year in Jail

By AFP

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The Boracay tanker. **Damien Meyer / AFP**

A French court Monday issued an arrest warrant and a one-year jail sentence against the Chinese captain of a suspected Russian "shadow fleet" tanker over failing to comply with orders to stop his ship.

Chen Zhangjie, 39, was sentenced in absentia after the French navy boarded the Boracay tanker in September before releasing the vessel and its crew days later, in what Russian leader Vladimir Putin condemned as "piracy."

The court in the western city of Brest also ordered Chen to pay a 150,000-euro ($172,000) fine.

The vessel, claiming to be flagged in Benin, was thought to be part of a fleet transporting Russian oil in violation of Western sanctions imposed over Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

Vessels in the "shadow fleet" frequently change the flags they fly, a practice known as "flag-hopping," and sometimes sail under invalid flags in an attempt to escape detection and tracking.

When the French navy approached the ship in international waters off western France on Sept. 27, it was thought to be transporting Russian oil to India, without a visible banner.

They informed the vessel they were going to board it at 14:32 p.m. local time (13:42 GMT) for a nationality check, according to the investigation.

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An hour later, the crew hoisted a Benin flag, but the authorities in Porto Novo had already told their French counterparts that no tanker was registered in their country.

The captain told the French authorities during his time in custody that he had not put it up initially because of the weather.

"It was raining and you don't put up a flag when it's raining," he said.

The captain stalled any boarding, saying he was waiting for authorization from the ship's owner, until the navy eventually boarded.

'Incomprehensible'

The Boracay, today named The Phoenix and flying the Russian flag, was on Monday in the Strait of Malacca between Malaysia and Indonesia, according to tanker tracking website Marine Traffic.

The captain's lawyer, Henri de Richemont, has called the ruling "absolutely incomprehensible."

He argues that a French court does not have the authority to rule in the case as the ship was in international waters.

Two employees of a Russian private security company were on board the Boracay when the French navy stopped it, an informed French source and the captain's lawyer have told AFP.

They were in charge of representing Russian interests and gathering intelligence, they said.

The Boracay has been linked to mysterious drone flights over Denmark last year, part of a spate of drone sightings and airspace violations in European countries blamed on Russia.

No formal link has however been established and Moscow denies responsibility.

The European Union lists 598 vessels, suspected of being part of the "shadow fleet," as banned from European ports and maritime services.

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