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Abandoned ship sold for €851,000 - stranded crew able to return home

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Sixteen crew members who were abandoned by their ship's bankrupt owners since March will soon be able to fly home to their families after the 6,894-tonne vessel MV *Nicea* was yesterday auctioned in court.

The ship sold for €851,000, from which the crew will receive €130,000 in salaries they were owed. Some of the money will also go towards their repatriation costs.



A company registered in the Marshall Islands, MSK, bought the boat, which was "arrested" in Maltese waters after its Turkish owners, Erwina Shipping Ltd, defaulted on bank payments.

The crew has been stranded in Malta for two months and managed to catch the media's attention after writing calls for help on bed sheets saying things like: "Help us. No food or electricity" and "Where is the ITF (International Transport Workers Federation)?"

"Our situation became critical on March 20 when provisions practically finished. We had no fuel for electricity supply so we had to cook on deck and ended up eating barbecued spaghetti for breakfast and dinner," Vladimir Motalov, captain of the Maltese-registered ship had said.

Contacted yesterday, Mr Motalov thanked the Maltese for their hospitality, particularly Transport Malta's David Bugeja and Anthony Caruana and also Karl Cutajar from the Nautical Institute.

"We suffered a lot in the beginning but we are leaving with a very good impression of Malta. We were not left for dead. We were helped and given everything we needed, so we are very grateful."

Since then, Malta Transport helped by providing food, water and electricity supplies while the bank in Holland that had initiated court procedures to keep the boat in Malta committed itself to supply three weeks of provisions.

The crew then requested a lawyer to be appointed by the court. Lawyer Cedric Mifsud initiated a case for the vessel's owners to pay their arrears and repatriations costs. But since the bank accepted to pay the crew through the sum it received for the sale of the boat, the case will be dropped.

Some crew members still had to be paid for six months work and to add to their difficult situation they were struggling to contact their loved ones because the phone onboard had been disconnected. When they spoke to *The Times* some said they had been at sea for up to six months and were yearning to speak to their families back home.

"We have to rely on our personal mobiles but with little credit and no salary it is very expensive and unaffordable to make overseas calls," one crew member said.

The youngest crew member was aged just 20 and had not heard from his family in a month.

They are expected to leave within the next two weeks and will soon meet up with the new owners of the boat to see whether they have any alternative plans for the crew.

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