

# 'A million dollars for your men'

A HONGKONG car exporter claims he was told he would have to pay up to \$1 million to secure the release of colleagues being detained by mainland police.

Mr Donny Lam, managing director of Hop Chong Hong Motor Trading Company, says a Government official in Shekou, acting as a go-between for the car company and the Public Security Bureau, told him if he wanted to secure the release of crewmen aboard an "arrested" tug and lighter, he would have to go to the mainland and "negotiate" with the police.

Eleven men — two from the car firm and nine from its shipping agency — have been held under Public Security Bureau (PSB) guard since last Saturday, when the tug boat and a barge carrying 20 cars worth \$4 million were intercepted near the border between Hongkong and Chinese waters.

The men who intercepted them were uniformed and carried automatic weapons.

Mr Lam claims he fears his staff has been forced to sign documents confessing to smuggling cars, an allegation he vehemently denies.

He and his marketing manager say they were told by various sources in the car ex-

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EXCLUSIVE  
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port and insurance industries that at least one other company in the same position recently paid \$1 million to secure the release of staff, and that Hop Chong Hong might be asked to pay a similar sum. Hop Chong Hong refused to identify the sources who made this claim.

Mr Lam says he is afraid to go to Shekou as he fears he will be detained until he pays a large sum of money.

He says the Shekou PSB told him through the go-between that if he kept quiet and negotiated with them, his staff would eventually be released. They urged him not to make a public issue.

Car export industry sources told him the PSB had intercepted about 500 cars on barges in the past three months, he says.

Mr Lam claims he has the relevant export licence issued by the Hongkong Government and a contract to export left-hand cars to a state-owned company in Guangzhou. He gave copies of the documents to the *Sunday Morning Post*.

The car exporter claims the tug, Kai Tong 602, and the barge, Hoi Man V 10,

were inside Hongkong waters when intercepted, but Chinese police are said to claim they were seized on the Chinese side.

About 4.30 pm, the uniformed police boarded the vessels near Chek Lap Kok and "escorted" the two boats to Shekou port, 40 kilometres from Shenzhen and on the China side of Deep Bay.

Three of the crew members arrested were being held in a detention centre last night, said the shipping agent involved, Mr Simon Lau. The other eight are being detained under guard on the barge, berthed at Shekou. None have been charged.

Mr Lau, who visited the Shekou public security bureau last week, said if his nine colleagues were not released by Tuesday he would hold a press conference calling for action and petition Governor Mr Chris Patten.

The Hongkong Security Branch has passed on details of this latest incursion to the territory's political advisers, who have taken up the matter with the New China News Agency, China's de facto consulate in Hongkong.

Mr Lau, of Wide Shine Terminals, claimed Hongkong police told him they could do nothing because the PSB claimed it seized the

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# \$1m blackmail threat for staff

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boats and arrested the crew in Chinese waters.

Hongkong Security Branch spokesman Mr Peter Randall said last night: "If the shipping company feels it had a totally legitimate cargo they have to take it up with the Chinese authorities.

"If they have other information, then that could be useful to us when we talk to the Chinese. We pursue these matters vigorously.

"We have to wait and see what the NCNA come back and tell us. Sometimes it comes through the border liaison office.

"If they say this company was smuggling we would ask them how they determine that. If there is evidence they had a legal cargo we would take it up further with the Chinese authorities, but until we get a response it's difficult to say what to do next."

Mr Randall said if the Security Branch had no response by tomorrow it would contact the NCNA again.

The shipping company's crew members being held are Ng Wai-man, 33, Leung Kam-tai, 26,

Leung Kwan-nam, 39, Chan Shing-yan, 31, Lai Ping-yin, 54, Keong Kan, 63, Leung Yau-hing, 48, Sin Tim, 37, and Chow Kam-yau, 39.

The car firm, Hop Chong Hong, declined to give identities of its two staff detained.

One staff member from the car exporters, one from the shipping agents and families of the detained crews went independently to Shekou last week to investigate, but their attempts to free the crew failed.

The car company's sales manager, Mr King Lam, claims plain clothes Chinese police officers burst into his hotel room in Shekou at midnight, arrested him, forced him to give fingerprints and sign a document he was not given a chance to read. The company fears the document was a forced confession to smuggling cars.

Hop Chong Hong claims the PSB interrogated the sales manager through the night, asking him questions about his boss' wealth and the company's turnover.

Mr Donny Lam is scared that a

refusal to negotiate with the Shekou authorities will lead to him being convicted of car smuggling and losing his licence to export to China, putting him out of business.

Hop Chong Hong's insurance company has threatened to refuse to pay out on the car company's claim due to a clause preventing compensation if the insured cars are involved in "capture, seizure, arrest, restraint or detention [piracy excepted], and the consequences thereof or any attempt thereat". The cars were insured for almost \$4 million.

Last night, legislators voiced concern over this latest alleged incursion.

Miss Emily Lau Wai-hing said: "These incidents really make us worried. The most important thing is the victims should speak up . . . if they don't, we won't know how serious the problem is and this might encourage their ruthlessness.

"If the allegations are true about the PSB's blackmail, I will say it indicates the complete lawlessness going on in China."

Legislator Mr James To Kun-

sun said: "These incidents seem shocking to us, mainly because of the differences in judicial practices between Hongkong and China.

"If the PSB has solid evidence to justify their allegations, they have the power to impose a kind of administrative penalty according to their own regulations without going to the court.

A Shenzhen government spokesman, Mr Huang Xin-hua, said he was not informed about the alleged incursion and detention.

"We will follow this up to see what exactly happened," he said. "It's not uncommon that we detain people while investigating them. We'll release them if they are found to be innocent. I'm sure the public security won't detain people and hold ships for no reason. They won't overcharge people, instead they will fine them according to the regulations."

The Shekou Public Security Bureau chief, identified as Mr Luo, declined to comment.

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