

# 'Arrested': a tug, a barge and 11 men

*Eleven Hongkong men are being held without charge in China after a tug and barge carrying cars to the mainland were intercepted by a Chinese marine police speedboat. As information on the men's fate seeps through to Hongkong, colleagues and families can only wait and worry. MARK McSHERRY and GARY CHAN report.*

**A**ROUND 4.30 pm last Saturday, staff at the Hop Chong Hong Motor Trading Company in To Kwa Wan received a call from the mobile phone of a colleague on a barge being towed to Guangzhou with a cargo of 20 left-hand-drive cars.

The nervous crew-member hurriedly explained that a Chinese marine police speedboat had pulled alongside the barge and its tug, and that uniformed officers armed with semi-automatic machine guns were boarding the Hongkong vessels.

The Hop Chong Hong staff hoped the interception was merely an inspection and that a follow-up call to give the all-clear would soon follow. That call never came – and after an hour the staff contacted the police.

Hongkong marine police sped to the scene of the alleged incursion near Chek Lap Kok, but found no trace of the barge, the tug or the Chinese marine police speedboat.

These mysterious events started a traumatic and bizarre week for staff at the Hongkong car trading company.

First they tried to locate their colleagues being detained just over the border, and then made futile attempts to somehow find a way to secure their release.

They succeeded on the first count, but now, eight days later, 11 men – the company's two staff and nine crew from shipping agents Wide Shine Terminals – are still being detained under Public Security Bureau (PSB) guard in Shekou port, 40 km from Shenzhen and on the China side of Deep Bay.

The car company's managing director Mr Donny Lam claimed he had learned that his detained colleagues were forced to sign documents alleging that they were smuggling and were intercepted in Chinese waters.

But he maintained: "Our company has absolutely not been involved in any smuggling activities. We have export documents and contracts to prove it.

"The Public Security Bureau said they were still investigating and had not charged them yet.

"They have the power to detain anybody as long as they want. I dare not go up and negotiate with them."

The managing director claims he was warned by the Shekou PSB through a Shenzhen government go-between, whom he would not identify further, not to "blow up" the event in the press, as they wanted to resolve it with Mr Lam themselves.

"I was told that if my attitude was co-operative, they would not do anything to my crew and men," Mr Lam said.

"It's not uncommon that people arrested are made to sign confessions. We don't want to see that happen to our people. It will be both a black mark for them and for the company's reputation."

Hop Chong Hong, a subsidiary of a locally-based garment manufacturer, has been exporting Japanese, German and American cars to major cities in China, including Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Guangzhou, since November.

Despite reported allegations by the Chinese police that the Hongkong crews were smuggling cars – angrily denied by the car exporters – none of the 11 being detained has been charged.

As the days pass, the company's marketing manager, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, grows more concerned.

"We are extremely worried for our colleagues," she said. "The Chinese police grabbed the barge right on the border between Hongkong waters and China. Our colleagues informed us by mobile phone.

"We waited for a while as we thought the Chinese police were just carrying out an inspection, but when we heard nothing further we contacted

the police. Since then we have heard nothing. We are just waiting by the phone all the time. We want to know if they are safe or not."

Mr Lam said it took two days of frantic negotiations on the mainland to confirm that their colleagues were being detained in Shekou. He claimed he was told the boat and barge were being held at Shekou port and the cars had been unloaded.

When shipping agent Mr Simon Lau, operations manager of Wide Shine Terminals, went to Shekou Public Security Bureau last Tuesday, he was allowed to speak briefly with the eight crew under guard on the barge, through the introduction of the border security chief.

Mr Lau spent only a few minutes aboard the ship with the crew, and found they were allowed to buy food at a wet market to cook on the lighter. One crew-member subsequently managed to make a secret IDD call to him.

Mr Lau also learned that the lighter's captain and two staff members of the motor company were under police custody in a detention centre and not under house arrest in a hotel, as the car trading company originally thought.

The shipping agent has already been in contact with the worried families of the crew.

Hongkong Tug Boat Association chairman Mr Lo Kun-shing also voiced his concern, saying: "We had a monthly meeting with the Marine Department and marine police last Friday [May 21]. They don't seem to be too helpful, except in reminding us to be more alert and improve the security of our ships.

"I am worried whether the marine police dare to confront public security officers armed with semi-automatic machine guns."

Mr Lau said his company only started providing ships for China export trade less than two months ago – and this incident had made them decide to stop.

"At this stage we are not worrying too much about our ships," he said. "I believe they won't confiscate our ships, before making charges and prosecutions."

The company ran a fleet of about 25 lighters, and was one of the territory's leading mid-stream operations companies, he said.

Yesterday, the *Sunday Morning Post* found the barge, Hoi Man V 10, and the tug boat, Kai Tong 602, moored side-by-side under high security about 100 metres off Shekou port.

Mr Lau confirmed these were his company's vessels.

At least four uniformed and armed Chinese police officers are stationed on board the barge, and frequent supplies arrive on a *tai fei*, or large speedboat.

The *Sunday Morning Post* watched as a *tai fei*, with four brown-uniformed police officers on board, transported supplies from the port to the boat at around noon.

There was a heavy police presence around the harbour office buildings, with at least six luxury police vehicles including a Lexus, Mercedes Benz and Toyota Crown, parked nearby.

Legislator Mr James To Kun-sun said it had to be proved without doubt that the interception took place in Hongkong waters.

Referring to the continuing problem of alleged incursions, he added: "The Government has been pursuing the issue vigorously by having regular liaison meetings with the Chinese side through the New China News Agency.

"Without concrete evidence of intrusion, the Hongkong Government

finds it difficult to protest to the Chinese Government.

"I'm quite sure that the marine police has been doing a good job patrolling Hongkong waters to minimise these intrusions; it would be unfair to put the blame on them."

Meanwhile, the families, friends and colleagues of the 11 detained men can only wait and worry.

Mr Sin Kwai-choi, 73, father of detained crew member Mr Sin Tim – who is married with two children – said he was so worried about his son that the family phoned the shipping company every day.

"My son called me from Shekou secretly last Thursday, saying he was all right but was unable to return immediately. He didn't know what went wrong and why they were detained.

"The boss of his company kept telling us that there was probably some problems with the goods and they were trying hard to get him released.

"It's the first time that he has got into this kind of trouble. We really don't know what to do. We have no plans to go to Shekou.

"I don't think it would do any good if we went up there, so we just wait for good news from his company every day."

EXPORT LICENCE Form 6 ORIGINAL	
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<b>Consignee (Name and Address)</b> 廣州市物資總公司經濟技術 開發區分公司 廣州市黃埔新港夏港大道19號	<b>Conditions of issue of this licence include the following—</b> (i) Normally this form is to be submitted in duplicate. However, for certain categories of goods, which are notified through Trade Department circulars, triplicates are required. (ii) Any number of items in licensable categories may be entered on this form provided all are shipped at the same time on the same vessel, aircraft or vehicle. (iii) The original must be given to the shipping, airline or transportation company for return to the Trade Department together with the relevant manifest. (iv) The exporter must lodge export declarations in respect of items of this licence within 14 days of shipment. (v) The name and address of the Hong Kong manufacturer or processor must be provided for locally produced commodities covered by this licence. (vi) In the case of re-exports, condition (v) does not apply. However, the country of origin of the items must be shown in the box provided for the purpose on this licence. (vii) This licence is valid for twenty eight days from the date of issue. (viii) HKD means Hong Kong Dollar.
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The licence granted to Hop Chong Hong Motor Trading Company by the Hongkong Government to export cars to China.

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