

# \$1m ransom probe

THE Chinese Government has ordered an official investigation into the seizure of vessels, detention of crews and ransom demands made by the Shekou Public Security Bureau and revealed by the *Sunday Morning Post*.

A Foreign Ministry spokesman in Beijing said the allegations, including one that Shekou PSB demanded a \$1 million ransom to release an 11-strong Hongkong car exporting crew, two vessels and 20 vehicles seized a month ago, were being "handled" by the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), the central government body ultimately responsible for police work in China.

Sources said it was believed Shenzhen PSB officials had gone to Shekou to question staff about the detention of the Hongkong vessels and crew.

The news followed confirmation from China's Public Security vice-minister Jiang

By GARY CHAN  
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in Beijing

Xianjin that extortion among mainland police officers and authorities had reached epidemic levels.

"Such actions have seriously tarnished the image of the public security authorities and damaged relations between the police and the masses," Mr Jiang said.

MPS officials in Beijing acknowledged the case reported by the *Sunday Morning Post* of Shekou PSB detaining the Hongkong crews from Wide Shine Terminal shipping agents and the Hop Chong Hong Motor Trading Company was being investigated, but despite persistent questioning he refused to specify which department was carrying out the investigation.

Shekou PSB arrested the 11 men near Chinese waters

off Lantau Island on May 15, and have detained them under guard for four weeks. The crews deny PSB allegations they were smuggling cars. They have not been charged.

One Beijing official said the case had been referred to the Guangdong provincial PSB but again refused to say if the investigation was being carried out by the provincial authorities.

Simon Lau, of Wide Shine Terminals, said his source in the Shenzhen Government had said the city's government and PSB have ordered an official to conduct an internal inquiry into allegations that Shekou PSB or border security demanded a huge ransom.

"I was told that the internal inquiry into the Shekou PSB means our men will be detained for a longer period of time," Mr Lau said.

He said his crew was ini-

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tially scheduled to be freed last Monday, but that the internal inquiry delayed their release.

Mr Lau said the Shekou PSB told him a report of the case had been submitted to the Shenzhen Party Committee last Saturday, suggesting investigations concerning the crew had been completed.

"The more parties are involved in the case, the more troublesome it will be," he said.

"What I want to stress is that I have not paid a penny

while negotiating with the Shenzhen authorities. The crew are chiefly our men, and the motor company should not say anything irresponsibly about paying ransom and getting the men released.

"We [the Shenzhen authorities and the shipping agent] have never talked about money."

Mr Lau said he went up to Shekou last week to comfort the crew, as they had become more anxious about the outcome when nobody from the Shekou PSB or Shenzhen Government bothered to brief them on the latest progress.

He said the crew looked all right and were not questioned again despite the internal inquiry.

A Hop Chong spokesman said: "We just want to know whether it's good news or bad news."

"We fear that if the Shekou PSB are ordered to report to their superiors they might need to find faults with the crew and charge them in order to justify their arrest and seizure.

"In that case, it's going to take months before the crew are freed. So the MPS' follow-up doesn't sound good for us."

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