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Henry Henry Standard

23 Oct 1941

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700 sailors may lose jobs in planned Royal Navy cutback

UK TO RETIRE HONGKONG CREW

from Ray Hearn
in London

MORE than 700 Hongkong-Chinese sailors serving with the Royal Navy face the possibility of losing their jobs in Britain because of a planned cutback by the British Defence Ministry.

It is not yet clear how many of the 700 sailors will be struck off the payroll but the job cuts could include Chinese officers who had seen action against the Japanese during World War II.

The British move was immediately slammed by the seamen's union in Hongkong. A spokesman said it would seriously affect the merchant shipping industry.

The British Defence Ministry is planning a reduction of the number of Hongkong-Chinese sailors who man nearly a third of the Royal Navy's 30 tankers and store ships.

The reasons given are the growing technical complexity and the language problem.

A spokesman for the Hongkong Seamen's Union, which has more than 3,000 members, said the reasons for the proposed reduction was unjustified because Hongkong sailors are regarded as hard-working and capable of learning quickly.

"Hongkong sailors are reputed to be very good on the job and capable of understanding complex machinery under supervision," the spokesman said.

"The language problem may exist in the Royal Navy but I'm sure the sailors can easily learn English to cope with the situation," he added.

"It is just a question of proper training for the Chinese crew," he said.

The planned reduction is expected to be gradual to minimise hardship among the Chinese sailors.

There are about 700 Chinese from Hongkong serving ships of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, which keeps warships around the world supplied with fuel, food, stores and ammunition.

The fleet also carries troops on North Atlantic Treaty exercises.

Although most Chinese petty officers can speak English, it is usually necessary for all orders given by ships' British officers to be translated for the benefit of young crew members.

But there is a feeling that with the introduction of more complex equipment into the service, it will be increasingly more difficult to instruct the Chinese in its use.

Chinese tailors and cobblers also serve in some larger warships, but they are not paid by the Ministry of Defence because they rely on their earnings from the crews.

They are unlikely to be affected by the planned cuts. One ship which could be seriously affected by the decision is the Royal Fleet Auxiliary stores support ship Stromness.

On board is a Chinese petty officer who has served 25 years with the Royal Navy - 12 of them with the Stromness.

Some of the Chinese officers have seen action against the Japanese during World War II.

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UK to retrench Hongkong crew

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The ship's executive officer said that few of the Chinese would admit their age, although they were supposed to retire at 65. "Often it is necessary to order them to take leave, even though their air fares to Hongkong are paid for, because they fear they might lose their jobs if they return home for a while," he said.

Stromness is now on exercises in the Mediterranean and has a multi-racial crew - 29 British merchant navy officers, 80 Hongkong-Chinese sailors, and six sub-lieutenants of the Sultan of Oman's navy who are under training.

The ship also has eight civil servants from the naval stores department assigned by a further 35 Chinese who handle various stores ranging from food to tiny valves for electronic equipment.

The report did not say whether the Chinese sailors serving the Royal Navy in Hongkong would be affected by the reduction.

The number of Chinese sailors in Hongkong make up about one-third of the total Royal Naval force.

The spokesman for the Hongkong Seamen's Union said yesterday there are more than 21,000 Hongkong seamen around the world, and Britain's decision to cutback on Chinese seamen will

seriously affect the job opportunity situation.

"The sailors from the Royal Navy stand a better chance of getting good jobs in the merchant shipping industry because they are highly qualified," the spokesman said.

"As it is the job situation is not very good for the Hongkong seaman because of various restrictions and discrimination," he added.

"If there are 700 well-qualified sailors on the market, it would mean young seamen will not have the opportunity of obtaining decent jobs," he said.