

Anger and relief after Palau frees fishermen

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FIVE local fishermen, jailed for one year for illegal fishing in the United States protectorate of the Palau islands, were released yesterday and accused the Hongkong Government and the American Consulate of failing to help them.

After their return to Hongkong, the five, three of them brothers, claimed they were jailed and fined a total of US\$30,000 (about HK\$232,800) when caught while trying to find shelter from an approaching typhoon on July 18 last year.

During a year-long family campaign for their release, pleas had been made to the Immigration Department, Omeico and the United States Consulate, as Hongkong and America are signatories to a prisoner exchange programme.

But despite these setbacks, help came finally from legislator Mr Tai Chin-wah, who approached the family early this year and helped them in their appeal for an amnesty.

He also accompanied Ms Cheung Kam-ho, 24, to see her brothers on one of her three visits to the island republic this year.

years each and fined a total of US\$70,000 on December 11, last year.

Their relatives, Law Shui-fook, 60, and Chan Man-tat 34, were each sentenced to two years' jail and fined US\$1,000 each.

The mainland crew members were granted amnesty and returned to China six weeks ago after being fined US\$1,000 each.

Ms Cheung acted as an interpreter at yesterday's press conference on behalf of her Puntli-speaking brothers, who were eager to thank

supporters, including the press and public.

She said they were looking for shelter among reefs surrounding the islands due to an approaching typhoon when they were arrested.

The five members of the Cheung family were released on parole after 373 days on July 26 after paying a total of US\$30,000.

According to Immigration Department records, about 17 similar cases had occurred in the past five years and some Hongkong

people had yet to be released, Ms Cheung said.

"I hope the Hongkong Government can work with these countries to get licences for fishing so as to avoid this kind of problem in the future."

Palau had granted licences to mainland and Japanese fishermen, she said.

Mr Cheung Heung-wai, the vessel's captain, described the 12 months he spent in a 100-square-foot room with a local convict who "was a crazy man".

"He always threatened to

beat us up. And he really did, though we were not seriously injured," said Mr Cheung, holding his eight-year-old son's hand.

The prisoners were given canned fish, rice and water, and only occasionally. Their feet and hands swelled due to malnutrition.

But the family's nightmare is not over.

They borrowed more than \$1.8 million, including interest to buy the \$2.5 million fishing boat which has not been used for the past year.