

NEWS | Wednesday, 21 May 2008

Azzopardi Fisheries caught up in net of EU investigations

MaltaToday can confirm that the two fishing vessels currently impounded in the Grand Harbour – MVF Sharone and MVF Gaja 1, later renamed “Abdi Baba” and “Cevahir” – belong to AJD Tuna Ltd, owned by fishing magnate Charles Azzopardi, in partnership with a Libyan company. Both are currently being investigated for shipping irregularities on the insistence of the European Commission, following reports by Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

The two vessels were originally named Manara I and Manara II, and were used as fishing trawlers to supply Azzopardi Fisheries’ bluefin tuna ranching pens in St Paul’s Bay and Comino.

Registered as Libyan vessels until last weekend, the two boats were renamed and reflagged twice in the Grand Harbour, Valletta, on Sunday: first as Maltese, and later as Bolivian. Reflagging is a process requiring certification by the Flag State, which in Malta’s case is given by the Malta Maritime Authority (MMA).

On Monday, Transport Minister Austin Gatt ordered an investigation following media reports appearing in L-Orizzont and MaltaToday, and after an EC delegation to Malta last week pressured the local authorities to take steps against what appears to be disregard of international shipping regulations.

Originally, the Manara I and Manara II were purchased by the AJD Tuna Ltd, together with its Libyan partners Manarat As-Sahil, in whose name they are legally registered with ICCAT as purse-seiner fishing vessels sailing under the Libyan flag.

These spent several years fishing for bluefin tuna in the controversial Libyan “conservation zone”: a 60-mile area earmarked by Sejf Al Islam Gaddafi, son of the Libyan dictator, ostensibly as a marine nature reserve, but in reality used as an exclusive fishing zone controlled directly by Libya.

Bluefin tuna would be transported to Azzopardi Fisheries’ pens, to be fattened and eventually sold under contract to Torei Tuna: a subsidiary of the Japanese industrial giant, Mitsubishi Corporation.

Last year, it was decided to replace the original Manara I and Manara II, which had become obsolete by comparison to more advanced types of vessel employed by French fishing fleets. AJD Tuna decided to leave the ageing Manara I and Manara II docked in the Grand Harbour, and instead purchase two second-hand Turkish vessels – the Abdi Baba and Cevahir.

MaltaToday is informed that these were purchased in partnership with French associates in the Turkish port of Bandarima, and were upgraded and refitted with sophisticated equipment in a Turkish shipyard, and then reflagged as Bolivian.

However, Bolivian authorities confirmed with Greenpeace and WWF that no such vessels were listed in that country’s register. In fact, photographic evidence shows that the Bolivian flag was inadvertently hoisted upside-down (in maritime terms, an “SOS” signal), and that the flag did not correspond with the vessels’ Turkish registration plates.

And yet these two apparently stateless vessels were granted entry into the Grand Harbour in April by Valletta port authorities. It is not known what form of documentation was shown to the local port authorities to gain permission to berth in Malta, but the local agent – in this case, AJD Tuna Ltd – is legally responsible for submitting the necessary paperwork.

Once docked in Malta, the Abdi Baba and Cevahir were renamed the “Manara I” and “Manara II” – effectively replacing the ageing vessels of that name (which at the time were still in the same port). Their flags were changed to Libyan ones, and the two impostor ships, having taken place of the obsolete fishing trawlers of the same name, set sail from Malta on 4 May, heading in the direction of the Libyan conservation zone.

On Sunday, MaltaToday published photos of the Abdi Baba and Cevahir before and after the renaming and reflagging exercise, which took place in the Grand Harbour between 21 and 28 April. A full report of the incident, including photos, was passed on to the European Commission and ICCAT by Greenpeace and WWF last week.

The latest developments regarding the two new vessels bearing the names “Manara I” and “Manara II” (in reality the Abda Baba and the Cevahir, brought from Turkey in April) is that they have both been impounded in the Libyan port of Al-Khums, awaiting explanation for the dubious registration.

Fishy business: identity fraud on the waves

Today, this newspaper can expand on the full story behind these four mysterious fishing boats, two of which were given permission by the local port authorities to dock in the Grand Harbour and then leave, despite numerous discrepancies surrounding their provenance and registration.

The Abdi Baba and Cevahir, as explained, took the place of the Manara I and Manara II and left Malta on 4 May. Meanwhile, the real Manara I and Manara II, still in the Grand Harbour, were last weekend also reflagged and renamed twice: first under a Maltese flag with the names “MVF Sharone” and the “MVF Gaja 1”, and later – on Sunday, the day before the investigation was launched – under Bolivian flags once more, and with the names “Abdi Baba” and “Cevahir”: thus regaining the identity of the two Turkish-bought vessels, now impounded in Libya.

Under this new identity, the two older Azzopardi-owned vessels (Manara I and Manara II) tried to leave the Grand Harbour on Sunday: but this time, the port authority refused them permission, claiming that they did not have EU clearance.

The “Abdi Baba” and “Cevahir” (sive “Manara I” and “Manara II”, sive “Sharone” and “Gaja I”) are now impounded in the Grand Harbour, and are currently being investigated by the local authorities.

MaltaToday is reliably informed that the reports made by WWF and Greenpeace International reached the desk of EU Fisheries Commissioner Joe Borg, who is understood to have immediately communicated with the Maltese authorities and insisted on an inquiry.

The investigation, launched Monday, is expected to look into the following questions: 1) if all the legal provisions regarding registration of ships were observed in these two cases and if not, to determine the parties responsible; 2) To determine whether the alleged wrongdoing was coming from the part of MMA or from third parties, and in the latter case to identify the said third parties; and 3) to assess whether the alleged wrongdoing amounts to criminal liability.

It is not known whether the other two vessels, originally Abdi Baba and Cevahir but now “Manara I” and “Manara II”, currently detained in Libya, are also to be investigated. If so, the investigation is likely to look into: 1) how two Maltese-owned vessels came to be flagged as Bolivian without any apparent knowledge by the Flag State; and 2) how an EU Port Authority gave clearance to two apparently “stateless” vessels to enter and leave the Grand Harbour.

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