# Rescue from troubled waters | Inquirer Opinion

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In what could easily be the most violent maritime attacks since the Israel-Hamas conflict in October 2023, Houthi rebels in the Red Sea sank two cargo vessels early this month. A total of 38 Filipino seafarers were caught in the crossfire, with 17 of them repatriated over the weekend, and eight brought to safely in Saudi Arabia. Several more were reported missing, and at least three are feared dead.

On July 6, Houthi militants using grenades, missiles, and drone boats, targeted the MV Magic Seas, whose crew included 17 Filipinos. The crew abandoned ship and were later rescued by a passing merchant vessel.

The following day, the rebels assaulted another Liberian-flagged cargo ship, the MV Eternity C, which was carrying 21 Filipino seafarers. Eight of them have been rescued and are receiving medical attention.

The latest incidents underscore the risks that Filipino sailors—who number more than 500,000 and comprise 25 percent of the global seafaring force—face in their job amid escalating geopolitical tension in recent years.

With at least four Filipino sailors still missing, the government must intensify efforts to coordinate a frantic search, using diplomatic channels to ensure cooperation from our counterparts in conflict areas, and pressuring recruiters to use their resources to help repatriate other sailors in vessels sailing similar troubled waters.

## Right of refusal

This crisis is nothing new and should compel the Department of Migrant Workers (DMW) to review its issuance on the right of refusal to sail among seafarers if the vessel’s route passes through war zones.

Following the March 6, 2024 missile attack from Yemen’s Houthis on the bulk carrier MV True Confidence that killed two Filipino crew members and seriously injured two other Filipinos, the DMW issued a directive mandating local manning agencies, accredited shipping principals, and employers to respect the seafarers’ right to refuse to serve on vessels plying high-risk and war-like sea lanes, particularly the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

In a department order dated March 21, the DMW advised principals in the shipping industry to allow seafarers to freely refuse to sail through areas identified as hazardous “without discrimination and prejudice” to their present and future employment, or to industry standards for wage, compensation, and benefits. They should also ensure that workers have access to information relating to the high-risk areas. The DMW also urged ship owners to divert their routes to avoid passing through war zones. Seafarers who refuse sailing should be repatriated safely, while those who agree to sail should be compensated and provided with additional safety measures, the DMW stated.

## Severe sanctions

But as a warning to manning agencies, shipowners, and Filipino seafarers to deter them from venturing into volatile waters, the DMW directive has apparently achieved little success, as seen from the two violent incidents in the Red Sea this month.

The most recent attacks should prompt concerned government bodies—the DMW, the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, in coordination with the Department of Foreign Affairs—to crack the whip on erring manning agencies and shipowners and investigate why they continue to ignore the DMW directive. They must also probe how accurately and extensively these parties have informed their crew of the dangers of their chosen route, if at all. How willing were the seafarers, and what compensation was offered, or threats dangled? Were the seafarers even aware that they could refuse to sail?

Given the dire consequences of shipowners and manning agencies flouting the DMW order, the agency must impose severe sanctions—not just suspension but cancellation of their license to operate, if only to make an example of them.

## Reckless optimism

The sanctions should be part of the government’s full implementation of the Magna Carta of Filipino Seafarers, or Republic Act No. 12021, a crucial provision of which deals with the seafarer’s safe passage and safe travel: “To this end, the shipowner shall: (a) Inform the seafarer about the possible hazards of the voyage and the ports of call; (b) Advise about the precautions to be taken; and (c) Issue the necessary documents.

“Overseas seafarers shall have the right to embark and disembark in other countries when in transit, and the right to be repatriated from a safe and convenient port and return to the point of hire.”

While Filipino seafarers might have ignored the red flags themselves—so focused are they on the increased compensation and remittances sent back home—it is incumbent on the government to protect them from their reckless optimism amid the gathering dark clouds on the horizon.

Looking out for the best interest of these sea-bound overseas Filipino workers isn’t just a matter of protecting their remittances and the country’s reputation as the world’s biggest provider of seafarers. As the vicious Houthi attacks have shown, this is a matter of life and death.