AROUND THE NATION;

Rumanian Defector Granted Asylum in U.S.

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Body

A ***Rumanian*** seaman who fled a freighter loading cargo in the Port of Houston was ***granted asylum*** in the ***United States*** today, the Immigration and Naturalization Service announced.

The seaman, Paul Firica, said he had been troubled by a lack of religious toleration in Rumania and decided to defect to where "freedom is respected."

Immigration officials said the 44-year-old diesel mechanic walked off the freighter Zalau shortly before the vessel left Houston late Tuesday. He made his way to the Harris County jail and was subsequently sent to the immigration agency for questioning.

Last week another ***Rumanian*** sailor, Stefan Vernea, 38, was ***granted asylum*** after jumping from a merchant ship in Jacksonville, Fla.

Paul O'Neill, an immigration official, said such defections were not uncommon but added that "the situation is sensitive" because of an incident in New Orleans last week when a Soviet sailor twice jumped ship, only to be re=turned to the ship.

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