

## Alarm as crew criminalisation on the rise

The increase of seafarer criminalisation has led to Bimco to call for Interpol to intervene in cases.

June 12, 2025

by Nick Savvides, Europe correspondent



Photo: Picture of Nick Savvides.

Bimco has called for Interpol to be called into help local jurisdictions investigate cases where criminality has taken place on board a ship and crew are seen as key suspects, as the rise in the criminalisation of crew raises alarm.

Jakob P Larsen, chief safety and security officer at Bimco made the call for action ahead of the "Protecting seafarers against criminalisation: what more can be done?" conference due to be hosted at IMO headquarters on 16 June.

The conference, organised by the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) and the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS), will include the IMO secretary general Arsenio Dominguez and the director of the International Labour Standards Department at the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Corinne Vargha, who will seek to protect seafarers from unsafe prosecutions.

"To avoid prolonged and unnecessary detentions of seafarers and ships, it would be great if an international law enforcement organisation like for example Interpol could facilitate effective criminal investigations," said Larsen.

Interpol advisers could help with criminal investigations in jurisdictions which have a history of cases of drug smuggling in ships.

"From an industry side we could offer the same law enforcement agencies practical insights into shipping practises. This would better inform law enforcement agencies' assessments of the actions of seafarers when investigating drug smuggling cases," added Larsen.

Bimco's intervention was inspired by event such as the arrest and conviction of Captain Marko Bekavac and chief mate Ali Albokhari, who were employed via Iskenderun Shipmanagment on the bulk carrier Phoenician-M.

Drugs were found on board the ship, but there was no evidence linking the narcotics to the crew. Both men were arrested, in September 2023, tried the following year in Turkey and both received 30-year sentences, where they remain.

Albokhari, had been married for 20 months, before his arrest, he has now spent more time in prison than with his wife Elena, who continues to fight for his freedom.

Elena Albokhari posed the question to Seatrade Maritime News: "Seafarers should not go to countries where they don't care who you are and where the justice system doesn't work at all. We have all the evidence, all the papers that shows the crew of the Phoenician-M are innocent, and yet my husband and the captain were convicted are in prison and nobody can intervene, why?"

It is an important question to ask, with the Turkish prosecutor having now reversed the decision on Bekavac and Albokhari and having informed Turkey's Supreme Court of that decision, the two crew are now waiting for supreme court judges to agree and to set the men free.

Elena Albokhari, points out, however, that the supreme court will be in camera, there is no jury, the judges will look at the evidence and make a decision. No court date has been set, and with the crew now having served nearly two years already, they were reportedly becoming despondent, before the prosecutor reversed his decision in April.

"Now we are a bit better, anyway we are very worried, but as you see the prosecutor says that there is nothing in the case. Our only hope is that the judges will decide the same," said Elena Albokhari, "If not, then it's back to Zonguldak [regional court] and again it will take months and they can again decide on the same, 30-year sentence."

Both Bekavac and Albokhari co-operated fully with the authorities, in Columbia where the first batch of drugs was found, and in Turkey where more narcotics were discovered, said Elena, but they were simply ignored by the Turkish authorities.

Jakob P Larsen, chief safety and security officer at Bimco argues that when jurisdictions make an effort to crack down on drug smuggling, seafarers must receive fair treatment and never be prosecuted and jailed without sufficient evidence.

“It is positive and necessary that we continue to focus on the criminalisation of seafarers. It is essential that the cases of rogue detention and imprisonment of seafarers without sufficient evidence are addressed by all nations and that calls for fair treatment continue,” added Larsen.

According to Larsen it is imperative that the maritime industry continues to raise awareness of these cases where seafarers discover and correctly report drugs on board only to find they are criminalised for speaking up.

“That will severely challenge efforts to encourage transparency. We must all continue to raise awareness of the fact that this is happening to our seafarers,” said Larsen.