

Mozambique seizes SA yacht, fines crew for 'illegal' salvage

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MOZAMBIQUE has confiscated a South African yacht and fined its crew more than R19 000 for alleged illegal salvage diving in its territorial waters.

The boat, the Richards Bay-registered Corolita, will be returned to its owners only if they pay \$80 000 or R225 860.

Three of the five remaining crew members — Vivian Harvey, Michael Bailey and Richard Bailey — have been given permission by the Maputo authorities to leave Mozambique, but have decided to stay aboard with skipper Alan Ubsdell and the yacht's engineer, Neil Harvey.

The Mozambicans ordered Mr Ubsdell and Mr Harvey to remain in detention aboard the Corolita in Maputo harbour.

The South Africans intend appealing against the decision tomorrow.

The yacht and its 11 passengers and crew, who set off from Richards Bay on a diving holiday on December 27, were detained earlier this month by the Mozambicans, and the vessel was placed under guard in Maputo.

Most of the Corolita's complement were released during the past week.

Contacted by radio telephone in Maputo yesterday, Michael Bailey said the five had been "utterly flabbergasted" by the penalties.

"This thing has just got worse and worse by the day. It's like a nightmare. They told us originally when they confiscated our dive equipment that we would get it back.

"Then they said we wouldn't have to worry about the yacht. Now this. The officials we have dealt with have been totally unreliable and untrustworthy."

The Mozambicans alleged the South Africans had illegally changed the crew of the vessel

without informing maritime authorities, removed items from a shipwreck without permission, and used a leisure boat for commercial purposes.

The fines for those offences, together with "expenses in connection with the detention" totalled R19 041.

Along with the confiscation order, a fee of \$80 000 or R225 860 was set for the return of the yacht to its owners.

The Mozambicans also alleged the yacht had been used to bring people illegally into the country.

Mr Bailey said he and the others aboard the Corolita "categorically denied" they had been diving for salvage, and added that all aboard the yacht had passports with valid visas.

The head of the South African Trade Mission in Maputo, Mr Dawie Laubscher, accompanied crew members to the meeting yesterday with port authorities, and helped translate the proceedings which were held in Portuguese.

Mr Bailey said the meeting was "nothing like a maritime court".

"We were simply informed about what the decision was. We didn't get a chance to say anything on our behalf."

Mr Bailey said the three released crew members had decided to stay in Mozambique out of solidarity with Mr Ubsdell and Mr Harvey and because "we are worried that the yacht will be stripped if Allan and Neil are taken away".

The yacht had already been burgled twice when two Mozambican soldiers guarding them fell asleep.

The three would also be needed to help sail the yacht back to South Africa if, "by some miracle", the Mozambicans released it.

Mr Bailey said although the crew may have been prepared to pay the fine to end the matter, there was "no way we can afford to pay that sort of money to get the boat back".

Mr Bailey said he believed some South African yachtsmen were

spreading "libellous stories" about the Corolita, accusing the yacht and its crew of being involved in commercial salvage diving.

Admitting that Corolita's divers had recovered a lost anchor for a fellow yacht in Richards Bay for a charge of R250, Mr Bailey said that money would be donated to the Richards Bay port authorities Christmas fund, "as some sort of apology for the bad behaviour" of the people on that particular yacht.

The Corolita crew also admitted they had several brass portholes but these had been recovered from a wreck in South African waters.

Mr Bailey said morale aboard the Corolita was "probably at the lowest level it can get".

"But we don't know what else they have got in store for us".

Boredom and lack of fresh food

have been the biggest problems. Mr Laubscher and other officials from the South African Trade Mission had been bringing "a few luxuries" like fresh meat and soft drinks but they survived on tinned food.

Cigarettes supplied to the Mozambican guards allowed the South Africans to leave the yacht to buy fruit and vegetables at a quay-side market about 60 metres away.

Apart from being allowed to shower in a nearby building, the South Africans are only allowed to move around if accompanied by a member of the SA Trade Mission.

Mr Bailey said: "I can tell you for the record now that I have read 'Asterisk and the Golden Sickle' about 100 times."

He said he was "dying to have some decent cigarettes" and "an ice-cold Castle".