

KUWAIT RESCUE MISSION

Thirty-seven days to freedom

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Passengers waiting to disembark from the MV Safer in Dubai after a short but nerve-racking journey fro

A true story of heroism by the crew of the MV Safer when they braved the severest adversity and managed to sail out of war-torn Kuwait in September 1990 with 722 Indian expatriates, including 265 women and children, and bring them safely to Dubai, in one of the biggest sea evacuations of people in a cargo vessel designed to carry only 40 persons. This humanitarian mission, carried out free of cost, is a shining example of the resounding success achieved by the collective efforts of Indians from all walks of life.

ON July 24, 1990, the MV Safer, owned by Oyster Marine Management Inc. and registered in Panama, set sail at 5:05 p.m. from Kandla Port in Gujarat loaded with a cargo of bagged rice and bagged animal feed.

The voyage to Kuwait was a routine one and without incident. The Safer arrived at Shuwaikh Port in Kuwait and docked at Berth No. 2 at 4:30 p.m. July 31. Discharging of cargo commenced at 4:45 p.m. and ceased at 9:30 p.m. when the shift ended. The next day, discharging operations resumed at 7:30 a.m. and

ceased at 9:30 p.m. as usual. On August 2, the agent at the port, Frank Rosario, called at 8:30 a.m. and informed me, a joint-owner of the vessel, about troops out on the streets in what looked like a military exercise. He said cargo work had not resumed and added that he would get back to me. I waited for an hour for his call but in vain. I learnt from the news channels that Iraqi troops had invaded Kuwait. I tried calling Frank for an update, without luck.

I tried to communicate with the Shuwaikh Port authorities but could not get through. All communication lines were cut and there was no way of knowing what the situation was in Kuwait and what was going on in the port. I contacted my colleague Capt. Ibrahim Modak in Dubai and informed him about the invasion and requested him to try to get in touch with either Rosario or the Harbour Master at the port. Our prime concern was the safety of the officers and crew as well as the vessel.

Next, I proceeded to our Mumbai office and informed Hanif, son of Capt. Ibrahim Modak, about the invasion. He said he was aware of the invasion and wanted to monitor the radio and news channels for updates. We as shipowners had never encountered a situation where our ship was caught in a war and we had to use all available resources to find out about the welfare of the crew and the ship with its cargo.

Capt. Modak informed me that he was not able to communicate with Kuwait, and I let him know that our attempts to communicate from Mumbai were also futile. We decided to get the Panama consulate to intervene as the Safer was registered in Panama. Capt. Modak would try to contact the Panama consulate in Dubai/Abu Dhabi, and we would try to contact Panama's consular representative in Mumbai.

Meanwhile, we were inundated with phone calls from families of some of the crew who had come to know about the invasion. We assured them that we were trying our best to contact the agent and once we got some news we would keep them informed. I also met our commercial managers, M/s Parekh Marine Agencies, and had a detailed discussion with L.D. Parekh, Suresh Parekh and Naresh Parekh on possibilities of asking for consular intervention through the Government of India.

Indeed, August 2, 1990, was a day of severe impact and it had put us in uncharted territory. I could not sleep that night as everything was in limbo.

The ship's log book entry of that day said:

No activity whatsoever in the port.

Heard news on radio that Iraq had invaded Kuwait. Sounds of gunfire and shelling could be heard on the vessel and fire and smoke could be seen all over from the bridge.

1000 hours: Approximately 15 helicopters flew over the ship and dropped a bomb one mile ahead and one mile astern of the ship. All crew remained in the accommodation throughout....

On August 3, TV news channels were broadcasting that there was heavy firing near the port area and that Kuwait was also under Iraqi air attack which was intensifying by the hour, and the city of Kuwait was under siege. I spoke to Capt. Modak early in the morning, and as there was no news from Kuwait about the ship we had decided to make all-out efforts to reach out to the Iraqi authorities in Mumbai and Delhi. Dr M.A. Patankar, who was the doctor for most of the consulates of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in Mumbai, was well known to Capt. Modak and Hanif. I requested Hanif to contact Dr Patankar and seek his assistance in getting an appointment with the Iraqi attache in Mumbai.

The phones were ringing continuously at the office as family members of the crew wanted to know about the safety of their loved ones on board the Safeer. It was a delicate moment and we had to handle their questions with sensitivity. They were told that as soon as we had some news we would personally call and inform them.

The ship log book entries on August 3:

Still no activity in the port. (All cargo operations had stopped in port.)

Sounds of gunfire and shelling could be heard and fire and smoke could be seen all over from the navigation bridge of the ship.

3rd August 1630 hours: Iraqi forces boarded Vessel and all officers & crew were taken off the ship & held at gun point & interrogated. At the same time lot of provisions and stores were removed by the Iraqi forces & the Radio Room was sealed. The officers & crew were brought back on the ship and the vessel was put under Iraqi army detention.

The ship was continuously being guarded by Iraqi soldiers and no movement was allowed outside the crew accommodation. All officers and crew were confined to their cabins.

On August 5, Capt. Modak informed me that the Panama consulate in Dubai was not able to help out with getting consular access on board MV Safeer. I informed him that Dr Patankar was trying to get an appointment for us to see the Iraqi attache in Mumbai.

First breakthrough

Our first breakthrough came when Dr Patankar arranged our appointment with the Iraqi attache in Mumbai on August 7. Both Hanif and I went for the meeting, which was brief and to the point. We informed him that our ship was currently at Shuwaikh Port... that Kuwait and we did not have any information regarding the ship or the crew. We informed him that the crew members were of Indian nationality and that we needed his help to allow consular access for a representative of the Indian Embassy in Kuwait to visit the ship and check regarding crew welfare and conditions on board. He said he would do his best to help us out and also requested us to contact the Indian government and seek

their intervention with the Iraqi authorities so that things could move on a diplomatic level. We also requested him to help us with the release of the ship from Kuwait.

The meeting had gone well and it gave us a level of comfort from the trauma which all of us were undergoing since August 2, 1990. After this meeting, I met L.D. Parekh, Suresh Parekh and Naresh Parekh in their office, Parekh Marine Agencies, and informed them about our meeting with the Iraqi attache. I also requested their help, through their contacts in New Delhi, to arrange a meeting with the officials at the Ministry of Shipping.

Following this, I spoke to an official at the Ministry of Shipping and briefed him about the ship and its crew of 26 Indians detained in Kuwait. I also informed him that the ship was owned by Non-Resident Indians and about the meeting and discussions in Mumbai with the Iraqi attache. I sought the Ministry's intervention with the Iraqi government to arrange for consular access.

I was also given telephonic access to an official at the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), whom I immediately informed about the ship's detention in Kuwait. The official said they would use their best endeavours to get permission from the Iraqi authorities to get consular access.

Meanwhile, pressure from family members of the crew was mounting as there was no news from Kuwait, and a lot of time was spent in speaking to them on the phone, trying to pacify them, and in meeting those who visited the office.

We had also heard that the Indian government was planning to evacuate Indian expatriates resident in Kuwait. The Shipping Corporation of India (SCI) was in the market to charter passenger ships for evacuating Indians from Kuwait. Naresh Parekh was in touch with the SCI to explore the possibilities of it chartering the MV Safer for the evacuation.

Our greatest challenge was to get approvals from various authorities to allow passengers to travel in a cargo vessel that had life-saving appliances for 40 persons. Our safety certificates had been issued by the Panamanian authorities, and we had to take their specific approval to allow us to carry passengers from the war zone, which were extraordinary circumstances. The Panamanian authorities had agreed to this provided we could arrange for extra life-saving appliances on board.

Our other major challenge was that the hull and machinery insurers had to agree to allow us to carry passengers on a cargo ship. If passengers were allowed on board without their approval, the insurance policy would be voided. Our Protection and Indemnity (P & I) Club, West of England, also had to agree to allow us to carry passengers. We approached Mankad of P & I Services, Mumbai, for his guidance in approaching the underwriters and getting their approvals. Helping in this was L.D. Parekh, who interacted with Mankad on a regular basis.

Mankad and I met the Chairman of the SCI with our proposal that the SCI charter the MV Safeer in these exceptional circumstances to evacuate some Indian nationals as the Safeer was already in Kuwait. The Chairman declined our proposal on the grounds that Safeer was not certified to carry passengers. The SCI wanted to charter passenger ships on a commercial basis.

The ship's log book entries:

From August 6 to 9: No activity in port. Ship under detention. No cargo work.

Iraqi soldiers on the jetty with guns. Guarding ship and Port.

10th August: Iraqi port authorities came on board with Iraqi stevedores with the intention of discharging cargo with shore cranes. The shore cranes were found to be not working so they ordered the Captain to arrange discharging with ships derricks by shifting the ship on the jetty. Suddenly they changed their minds and told captain not to shift the ship. They stated that on the 11th they might consider to sail the ship to Iraqi port of UMM QASR and discharge the cargo at Umm Qasr. In order not to go to Umm Qasr the chief engineer, chief officer and electrical officer went on the jetty and located the power supply switches for the cranes and put them ON. The cranes could now work and the Iraqi authorities left the ship with the intention to start discharging cargo on 11th August. The shifting to Umm Qasr was avoided.

August 11 was a key date for events that followed.

What the ship's log on that day said:

0740 Commenced discharging rice cargo by Iraqi authorities.

1205 Mr S M Mathur, Second Secretary of Indian Embassy at Kuwait, boarded the ship to check regarding the welfare and safety of crew and ship. All crew and officers were safe and in good health. It was a big relief for the crew to have Mr Mathur visit the ship.

(If the ship would have shifted to Umm Qasr then Mr Mathur could not have boarded the ship and we would have not got any news regarding crew welfare.)

By August 13, the cargo was being discharged under the control of the Iraqi authorities.

On August 14, Capt. Zain Abidin Juvale sent a radio message in disguise. It was sent under the identity of MV Hayatt, which was another ship owned by us. It stated:

“All crew safe, kindly convey same to families ETD uncertain, regards, Juvale.”

We were extremely relieved to get this message and the same was conveyed to the families of all crew members. The MEA also informed us that Mathur had boarded the vessel and the crew and the vessel were safe. We now knew that the Indian government had started a dialogue with the Iraqi authorities and had started the process of intervention through diplomatic channels. We as

shipowners had put up a proposal to the Ministry of Shipping to allow the Safeer to carry Indian nationals. Officials at the Ministry rejected the proposal on the basis that Safeer was a cargo ship fitted with life-saving appliances for a complement of 40 persons and that if the ship were to hit a mine or be subjected to an attack from air or sea the consequences would be disastrous with severe implications for the government.

Turning point

External Affairs Minister I.K. Gujral was on a visit to Kuwait, and he had also met Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in Baghdad. In that meeting he was given the go-ahead that Indian nationals trapped in Kuwait would be allowed to leave by land, sea or air.

On the Safeer, discharging of cargo continued under the supervision of the Iraqi army.

On August 21, S.M. Mathur once again boarded the ship to escort Capt. Juvale to meet Gujral at the Indian Embassy in Kuwait. The Indian government was keen that some Indian nationals could be allowed to leave by MV Safeer which was already at Kuwait. Capt. Juvale also informed Gujral that he was in a position to carry Indian refugees and requested that discharge of cargo be expedited, and that permission be given to carry Indian nationals on board. He also sought naval escort for the ship in Iraqi waters.

On August 23, Capt. Juvale again visited the Indian Embassy and was informed about the possibility of evacuation of Indian nationals on the MV Safeer and told that he should start preparing the vessel. This matter was discussed intensely by the Ministries concerned of the Government of India and the shipowners.

Preparing the ship

Since Indian nationals were officially allowed to leave Kuwait, I proceeded to Delhi after securing an appointment with the Ministry of Shipping. I met officials from the Ministry in New Delhi and suggested that the Indian Navy could help in providing additional life jackets and life rafts to the ship in Kuwait. This suggestion was received well and I was given contact numbers of Indian naval officials in order to explore the possibilities. The Indian naval authorities later on confirmed to me that they could arrange for additional life jackets to be provided to MV Safeer.

We were now making progress and I was asked to meet K.P. Fabian, then Joint Secretary, Gulf, at the MEA to work out the evacuation plan. Fabian welcomed me warmly and I requested him to facilitate communications with Capt. Juvale. I had given instructions to Capt. Juvale through the Indian embassy in Kuwait to prepare for the evacuation and to get in touch with the Iraqi military authority in Kuwait in order to get directions for a safe passage out of Shuwaikh Port as the port could have been mined.

I once again sent a detailed message to Capt. Juvale through the Indian embassy, which was received by him on August 30 and to which he had replied on August 31. He also spoke to Fabian and informed him that preparations about the evacuation efforts were in full swing. On September 1, Capt. Juvale visited the Indian embassy and sent messages to the MEA, New Delhi, about plans and preparations.

On September 1, by 5:30 p.m. all the cargo was discharged and the ship was being prepared for embarkation of passengers. The preparations included making 20 temporary toilets on the main deck aft along with sanitary arrangements. All cargo holds and the main deck were cleaned thoroughly to accommodate passengers.

The Immigration Office in the port area had been ransacked, but the crew had befriended the Iraqi forces and managed to get their passports back. Once all clearances were in place, Safeer's crew started working to create makeshift facilities for the evacuees to use during the short haul from Kuwait to Dubai.

The job of selecting passengers to travel on the MV Safeer was a difficult one as everyone wanted to travel on the ship. It was entrusted to the transport committee of the Indian community. There were about 500 Indians who needed urgent evacuation. They included persons who were very sick as well as children and nine pregnant women. The evacuees were selected in consultation with doctors. There were six doctors and 10 nurses who were also selected to make the voyage from Kuwait to Dubai.

September 2: The ship is being prepared for embarkation of passengers. All safety equipment and life-saving appliances are tested and found in satisfactory condition.

September 3: The Master confirmed that he had received 387 life jackets and 14 life rafts which were delivered with the help and assistance of Capt. Matthews, the chief nautical surveyor at Shuwaikh Port. The life jackets were supplied by the Indian Navy and the life rafts were sourced locally.

September 4: Embarkation starts around 9 a.m. Ship officials decide to take 700 passengers, but just after the embarkation of 700 people, some people started to cry and beg in panic to board the ship. The final number was 722 evacuees, including 265 women and children.

The ship was registered in Panama, but as there were 722 Indian evacuees on board and 26 Indian crew members, Chief Officer Nazir Mulla flew the Indian flag on the stern and the Iraqi flag on the main mast. He had also hung signs of Al Hind on the port and starboard sides. This was done so that the Iraqi naval boats were aware that the Safeer was sailing out of Kuwait with Indian evacuees and not to open fire.

1630 hours: 722 Indian nationals embarked.

1650: Pilot on board.

1750: Just as the ship was entering the channel outbound, there was a loud explosion near the floating dry dock area. It must have been very frightening for the evacuees who had just boarded the ship. The tug that was assisting the ship rushed to the scene of the blast and returned to the ship. Thankfully, the Safer negotiated the outbound channel without further incident.

1807: Pilot disembarks.

2000 hours: V/L (vessel) commences sea passage to Dubai.

The Safer was out of Kuwaiti waters but it was still not out of danger as British and American naval forces had surrounded the international sea border. They could fire at an unknown ship coming from Kuwait. The Master was instructed to send radio messages to Western naval forces informing them that the MV Safer was proceeding from Kuwaiti waters with 722 Indian nationals on board and to grant the ship a safe passage in international waters.

Not everyone was as lucky as the MV Safer. As per Lloyd's List, a journal on the global shipping industry, during the war, 23 seamen of Greek and Filipino nationalities were detained by Iraqi forces when their ship MV Sea Music, too, was caught in the invasion of Kuwait. Their fate and whereabouts were not known.

After two days of sailing through the mined waters off Kuwait, with the risk of facing fire from the Western naval forces, on September 6, at 6:24 p.m., the MV Safer arrived safely at Dubai anchorage. The Master was given clear instructions not to give any information to the media about the conditions prevailing in Kuwait in order not to antagonise the Iraqi authorities who had allowed the vessel to sail from Kuwait and also not to jeopardise the evacuation efforts for the Indians still remaining in Kuwait.

Capt. Modak, Dubai office manager Peter Mathias, and I boarded the ship at the anchorage with nearly 800 packets of food and water bottles for all on board. Our good friend Dr Kinnikar had also volunteered to come on the ship to check if any passengers needed urgent medical attention.

The evacuees were happy that the owners visited the ship with food and showed concern for their health as we had Dr Kinnikar with us. We did not know that there were six doctors and 10 nurses on board making the voyage from Kuwait. Later, I met the Chief of Immigration and the Chief of Police in Dubai in order to clarify security issues before the vessel was allowed to berth to disembark the passengers.

September 7: Capt. Modak, Mrs Saadiqa Modak (daughter of Capt. Modak), Peter Mathias along with our Dubai office staff, and I were at the pier by 7:30 a.m. to welcome the passengers. We had arranged 1,000 food packets and water bottles to be given to the passengers while disembarkation was in progress. Volunteers from the Indian community had also provided water bottles and light snacks for the evacuees.

The Indian Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and representatives of the Indian embassy were also there on the jetty to welcome the evacuees and to make sure that they were transported immediately to the Dubai International Airport for their onward flights to India.

The Dubai Port Authority, Dubai immigration officials and the Dubai Police worked tirelessly in ensuring the safe disembarkation of passengers. The vessel berthed at Berth Number 3 at 8:30 a.m. All passengers were disembarked from 9:10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

This humanitarian rescue mission was completed and we carry the blessings of all passengers who were reunited with their families. We applaud the efforts of the Master, officers and crew of MV Safeer for showing exemplary courage in the face of crisis and adversity, and for their professionalism and conduct throughout this difficult period.

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