

X-Press Pearl Captain trapped in Sri Lanka for over three years

Photo: X-Press Feeders



Captain Vitaly Tyutkalo stares at the sea unable to go home

More than three years on from being arrested in Sri Lanka following the fire on the container ship X-press Pearl Captain Vitaly Tyutkalo still cannot return home.

[Marcus Hand](#) | Aug 20, 2024

The images of the [X-Press Pearl](#) on fire and sinking off Sri Lanka in May 2021 made global headlines, but rather less well known is the plight of its Master – Captain Vitaly Tyutkalo - still awaiting trial and unable to leave the country. *Seatrade Maritime News* spoke recently with Capatin Vitaly about his ordeal.

The X-Press Pearl had been newly delivered from China in early 2021 but was to meet a sorry end just months later ablaze with a fire caused by leaking dangerous cargo that led to the ship sinking off the coast of Sri Lanka despite the valiant efforts of Capt Vitaly and his crew to save the vessel.

Related: [Video: Explosion as container fire rages on X-Press Pearl](#)

On the voyage from Jebel Ali leading up to arrival in Colombo the X-Press Pearl had followed procedures for the stowage of dangerous cargo and tackling the leak when it was discovered. Multiple ports refused to offload the leaking container meaning it was still onboard when the vessel arrived at anchorage in Colombo on 19 May 2021 where a fire erupted which ultimately destroyed the vessel.

Rather than being hailed as a hero who battled to save the vessel and ensured his crew made it off alive when an explosion ripped through the X-Press Pearl more than three years later Capt Vitaly remains stranded in Sri Lanka the subject of criminal proceedings.

Related: [Criminal investigation underway as X-Press Pearl flames subside](#)

He has been unable to return home to visit his family in his native Russia, his passport confiscated by the authorities, and legal proceedings drag on with no apparent end in sight.

Command of the X-press Pearl – a new ship

Capt Vitaly is a man who dedicated his life to working at sea having graduated from the Russian marine academy and had worked for X-Press Feeders for around two years prior to the command on board the X-Press Pearl.

The X-Press Pearl was new vessel and Capt Vitaly was its second Master taking over from a crew of Chinese seafarers who had delivered the newbuilding from the yard in China. At the time newbuildings from China had to be delivered with Chinese crew due to Covid restrictions on international seafarers entering the country.

When Capt Vitaly and his crew took over Xpress Pearl it was still brand new with plastic coverings remaining on fittings and he describes it as a “very good vessel”.

Final voyage and loading dangerous cargo

On the X-Press Pearl’s final voyage at the port of Jebel Ali it was loaded with a container containing a cargo of nitric acid. The container had been properly identified as dangerous cargo and stowed correctly above deck on the hatch cover, and there appeared to be no issues with the container or its cargo.

The X-Press Pearl sailed to Hamad Port in Qatar where a leak was noted from the container. Responding to the corrosive leak Capt Vitaly implemented washing overboard using the ship’s hoses, as prescribed in the vessel’s safety management system. They were ordered to stop washing overboard due to the potential release of a pollutant into the sea. A request to remove the container from the vessel was denied due to a lack of storage facilities for the leaking container.

Shipper for the container Transvision then asked for it to be discharged at the next port of call in Hazira. On the voyage to Hazira the container was monitored, and leaking acid washed overboard. Prior to arrival in Hazira leaking from the container had stopped. However, local authorities would not allow for it to be offloaded in Hazira and with Cyclone Tauktae approaching the port the decision was made to sail to Colombo.

Arrival in Colombo

On arrival at Colombo orange fumes were observed coming from the container, which according to experts is not smoke but a reaction of nitric acid with air. When nitric acid reacts with oxygen it produces brown fumes. Requests were made to bring the vessel into port and discharge the container – these requests were refused.

On 20 May Sri Lankan Navy personnel boarded the X-Press Pearl at anchorage to inspect the vessel. That evening flames were observed from the container as well as rising temperatures on board the vessel.

At the start of the fire on 20 May Capt Vitaly said he requested to Colombo Port Authority to be given a berth for firefighting assistance, but this was also refused. The refusal to allow the vessel into port is

something that Capt Vitaly sees as key in its eventual destruction. He says that if at the beginning of the fire the X-press Pearl had brought alongside it would have been much easier to carry out firefighting operations. While he acknowledges this would cause some danger at the berth, he notes Colombo is a large port and the vessel could have been berthed in at a remote pier.

Instead, a tugboat with firefighting capabilities was dispatched from shore, and a day later of 21 May Smit Salvage was engaged on LOF terms.

"It was a really dangerous situation, but we are trained for all situations including fire, flooding, collisions, we can manage, and we are trying to save the vessel and its cargo."

Rescue personnel specialised in firefighting flew from the Netherlands but by the time specialised equipment arrived all the ship's own firefighting equipment had already been used up. This left the crew fighting the fire with sea water which is unsuitable for tackling a chemical fire.

Abandoning ship

After five days of worsening fire onboard the vessel, in which time Capt Vitaly says the crew and company tried to everything they could, an explosion ripped through the ship. The explosion was seen by a nearby tugboat who came to the aid of the crew of the X-Press Pearl.

"It was early morning, five o'clock, it was dark, and it was very visible that the explosion was on the accommodation block, not only the cargo hold," he recounts. With watertight doors destroyed the fire immediately started to spread into the accommodation block.

Sri Lanka Air Force Media



Fire rages aboard X-Press Pearl

Capt Vitaly took the decision to abandon ship and the crew tried to make their way to the lifeboat but was unable to reach it as there was too much smoke. He says they then tried to look for another way off the vessel such as using the pilot or accommodation ladder, but the weather was too heavy.

The nearby tugboat came to the rescue coming alongside to touch the bow of X-Press Pearl and one-by-one the crew jumped to safety. Due to the severe weather the height downwards between the two vessels was as much as 10 metres in some cases and two crew members suffered leg injuries in

jumping down onto the tugboat. However, Capt Vitaly says he is happy as all the crew were alive, even if there were some injuries, after abandoning the vessel during a major fire.

The crew were brought ashore in Sri Lanka as distressed crew. The X-press Pearl subsequently sank on 2 June while being towed to deeper waters, by this time the vessel had been on fire for 12 days.

Arrest and charges

Capt Vitaly was arrested when the crew came ashore and first appeared in Sri Lanka's High Court on 14 June 2021. He was held in the country without charge until November 2020 when he was formally charged.

He faces two distinct charges - one under the Prevention of Marine Pollution Act of 2008 for releasing a pollutant into Sri Lankan waters. The second charge is under Section 26 of the Marine Environmental Protection Act and under Section 17 of the Code of Criminal Procedure Act for enhanced compensation caused by a criminal act. A court travel ban remains in place related to the second charge.

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Capt Vitaly was only formally asked to plead guilty in court in March 2024 and pleaded not guilty. Court proceedings related to this charge continue to drag on with the court convening on case most recently on 18 June and 6 August where the State presented progress on an "Advanced Digital Forensic Audit" on the alleged deletion of e-mails on the part of officers of Sea Con Lanka Limited. The State requested more time to complete the investigation which the court granted despite a challenge by the defendants' lawyers over the time it was taking to complete the investigation. All parties will now reconvene in the court on 3 December 2024.

This process now leaves Capt Vitaly almost certainly unable to leave Sri Lanka before 2025, more than three and half years after the incident with the X-press Pearl, and with no certainty as to when his passport might be returned.

Stranded in Sri Lanka and missing life events

Capt Vitaly is by no means imprisoned while in Sri Lanka staying in a house paid for by his employer and is free to move around the country itself. However, he is unable to return home and has no idea when he will be able to do so.

The uncertainty of his situation and being trapped indefinitely overseas has clearly taken its toll. “I just don’t what is happening with me – the High Court seems to go on forever, it has already been three years,” he says. He missed his eldest daughter’s wedding a year and his younger daughter, 19, has graduated from school, which he was unable to attend. He says it was “heartbreaking” missing these life events with his family.

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His family have however been able to visit him in Sri Lanka, including his wife and youngest daughter.

Capt Vitaly’s employers X-Press Feeders have continued to support him throughout his ordeal. As well legal support, they have paid his salary and accommodation in Sri Lanka, previously in a hotel and now in a rented house, as well as a car. He describes the support he has received from his employers as “unbelievable” and says that his lawyer has been extremely involved in his case. “But unfortunately, they have no control over how slow the court process is, they have no control over my case, or who has my passport.”

A stressful situation

Being in Sri Lanka itself has been a stressful situation with country undergoing serious economic and political turmoil. Riots and protests in 2022 saw former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa fleeing the country. Living in hotel across from Sri Lanka’s parliament at the time Capt Vitaly saw protesters blocking roads and destroying cars. “For me it was stressful as I really didn’t understand what was going on in the country,” he says.

The situation is also taking its toll on Capt Vitaly’s health and while staying at the hotel he suffered a heart attack and continues to be on medication.

Despite the adverse events and uncertain future, he comes across as remarkably positive during our conversation. “Yes, I’m a very positive man, even during the fire. You know if we are not smiling, we will die.”

As it stands though when Capt Vitaly will be allowed to return home is unknown. "But how long? Nobody knows, it could be one year, three years, 10 years."

Asked if he a message for Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena about his predicament Capt Vitaly says: "Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, can you please help me to go home to my family? I have waited for three years in your good country. I have lost these years of my life without my family. Can you please help me to get a decision from the court? Help me to get some certainty for my life and direction."