

Daniel left his home in Indonesia to work on a Chinese fishing vessel. He died on the other side of the world

IAN URBINA
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL
PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 5, 2023
UPDATED NOVEMBER 6, 2023



Daniel Aritonang leans against a railing of the bridge on the Chinese squid-fishing boat the Zhen Fa 7 in this undated photo, while out at sea.

FERDI ARNANDO VIA FACEBOOK/FERDI ARNANDO VIA FACEBOOK

This story was published in co-ordination with [The Outlaw Ocean Project](#), a non-profit journalism organization in Washington. Reporting and writing was contributed by Ian Urbina, Joe Galvin, Maya Martin, Susan Ryan, Daniel Murphy and Austin Brush. This reporting was partly supported by the Pulitzer Center.

Daniel Aritonang worked hard to secure himself a position on board a Chinese fishing vessel. After graduating from high school, in 2018, he had struggled to find work. The rate of unemployment in his native Indonesia was high: more than 5.5 per cent nationally, and more than 16 per cent for youth. Climate change has made matters worse; many of Indonesia's 17,000 islands are sinking. Mr. Aritonang's home is roughly 100 yards from the Indian Ocean. His village is losing coast from sea level rise at an average of between 10 and 15 yards a year.

When Hengki Anhar, a local friend, suggested the two of them go abroad together on a fishing boat, Mr. Aritonang agreed. Friends and family were surprised by his decision, because the demands of the job were so high and the pay so low. But a job was a job, and both he and Mr. Anhar desperately needed work. "On land, they ask for my skill," Mr. Anhar said, recalling why he had decided to go to sea. "To be honest, I don't have any."

In 2019, Mr. Aritonang and Mr. Anhar contacted PT Bahtera Agung Samudra, a "manning" agency based in Central Java. In the maritime world, manning agencies recruit workers and supply them to fishing ships. They handle everything, including paycheques, work contracts, plane tickets, port fees and visas. They are poorly regulated, frequently abusive and have been connected to human trafficking.



Daniel Aritonang (second from left) and his good friend Hengki Anhar (right) were among a group of Indonesians who were recruited to work on the Chinese squid-fishing boat the Zhen Fa 7.

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On July 5, 2019, following the agency's instructions, Mr. Aritonang and Mr. Anhar took a boat to Java and then made their way to Tegal. There, they took medical exams and handed over their passports and bank documents, along with several headshots and copies of their birth certificates. (PT Bahtera does not have a license to operate, according to government records, and did not respond to requests for comment.)

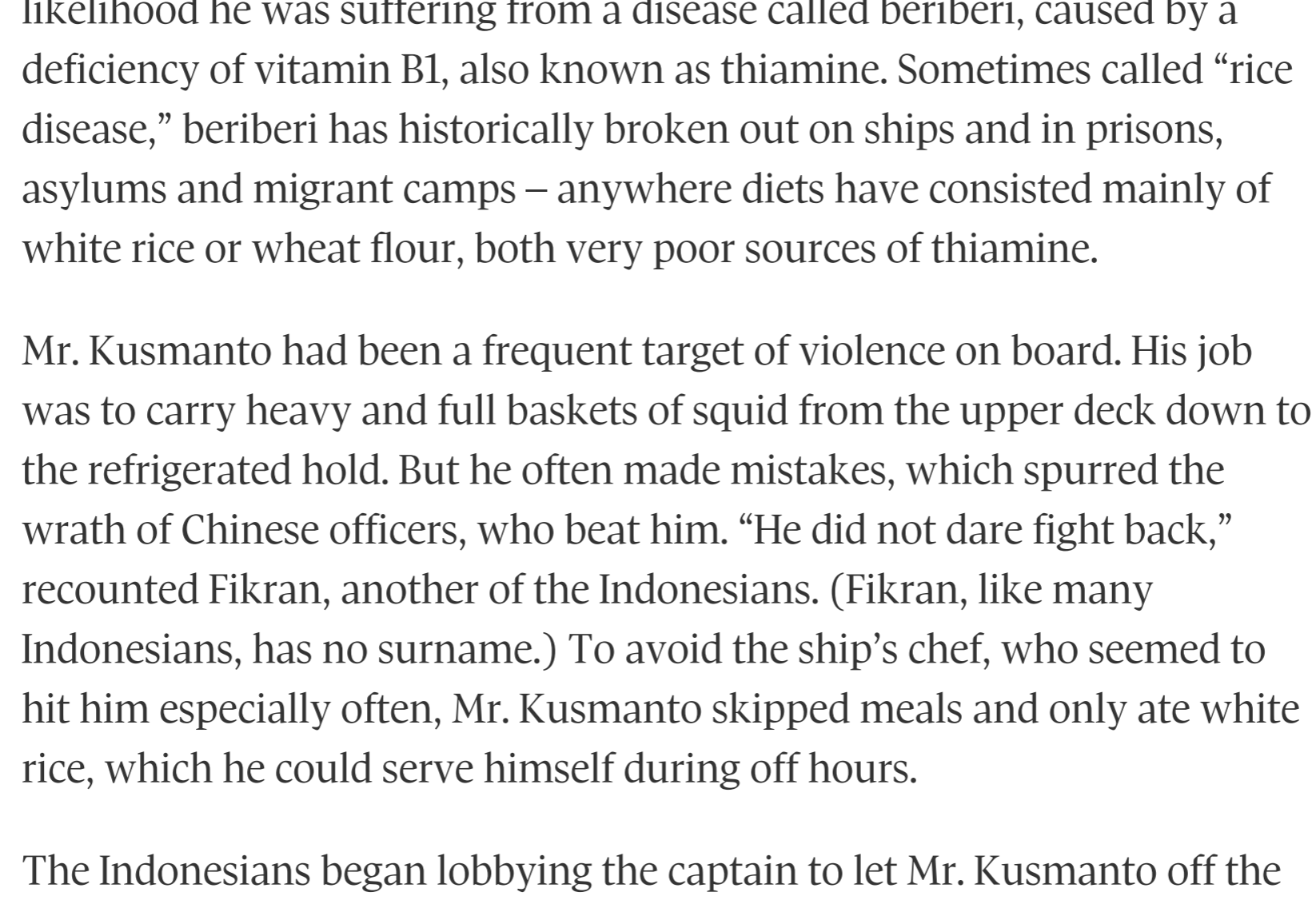
For the next two months, they waited in Tegal to hear if they had been hired. Money ran short. Through Facebook messenger, Mr. Aritonang wrote to his friend Firmandes Nugraha, asking for help paying for food. Mr. Nugraha urged him to return home. "You don't even know how to swim," Mr. Nugraha reminded him.

Eventually assignments came through, and, on Sept. 2, Mr. Aritonang appeared in a Facebook photo with other Indonesians waiting in Busan, South Korea, to board their fishing vessels. "Just a bunch of not-high-ranking people who want to be successful by having a bright future," Mr. Aritonang said on Facebook.

That day, Mr. Aritonang and Mr. Anhar boarded a ship called the Zhen Fa 7, which set sail across the Pacific. The ship's crew numbered 30 men: 20 from China, and the remaining 10 from Indonesia. By December, 2019, the Zhen Fa 7 had crossed the Pacific and was fishing near the Galapagos Islands. The vessel would spend the next two months chasing squid in international waters off the west coast of South America.

The captain's quarters were situated on high. Officers slept on the floor below him, and the Chinese deckhands under that. The Indonesians occupied the bowels of the vessel. Clotheslines of drying socks and towels lined the walls, and beer bottles littered the floor. Mr. Aritonang lived in a room with five others. The captain issued each Indonesian two boxes of Supermi instant noodles per week for free. The costs for additional snacks, coffee, alcohol or cigarettes were deducted from their salaries. The Indonesians were paid US\$250 per month, along with a US\$20 bonus per ton of squid caught.

Alongside Mr. Aritonang on the Zhen Fa 7 was another Indonesian named Heri Kusmanto, who fell ill in June, 2020. His legs and feet swelled and became achy. Listless, he lost his appetite and ability to walk.



In this undated photo, crew members work on the squid-fishing lines on the deck of the Chinese squid-fishing boat, the Zhen Fa 7.

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The Indonesians on board speculated that the cause was that he had eaten too many noodles and had too much dirty water to drink, but in all likelihood he was suffering from a disease called beriberi, caused by a deficiency of vitamin B1, also known as thiamine. Sometimes called "rice disease," beriberi has historically broken out on ships and in prisons, asylums and migrant camps – anywhere diets have consisted mainly of white rice or wheat flour, both very poor sources of thiamine.

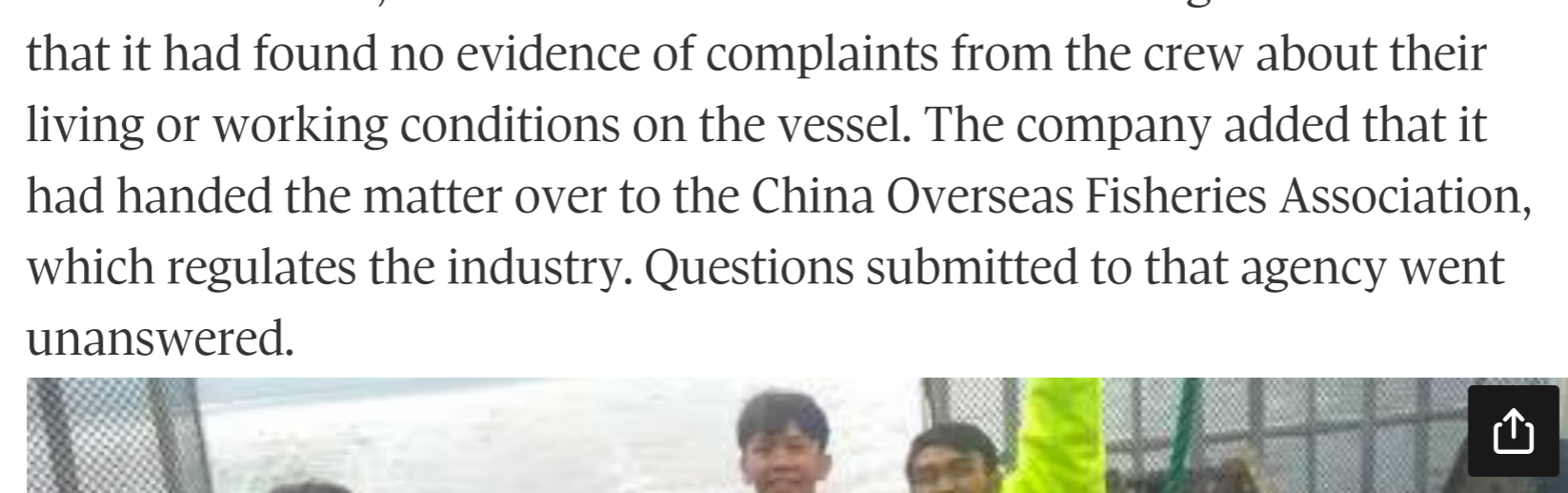
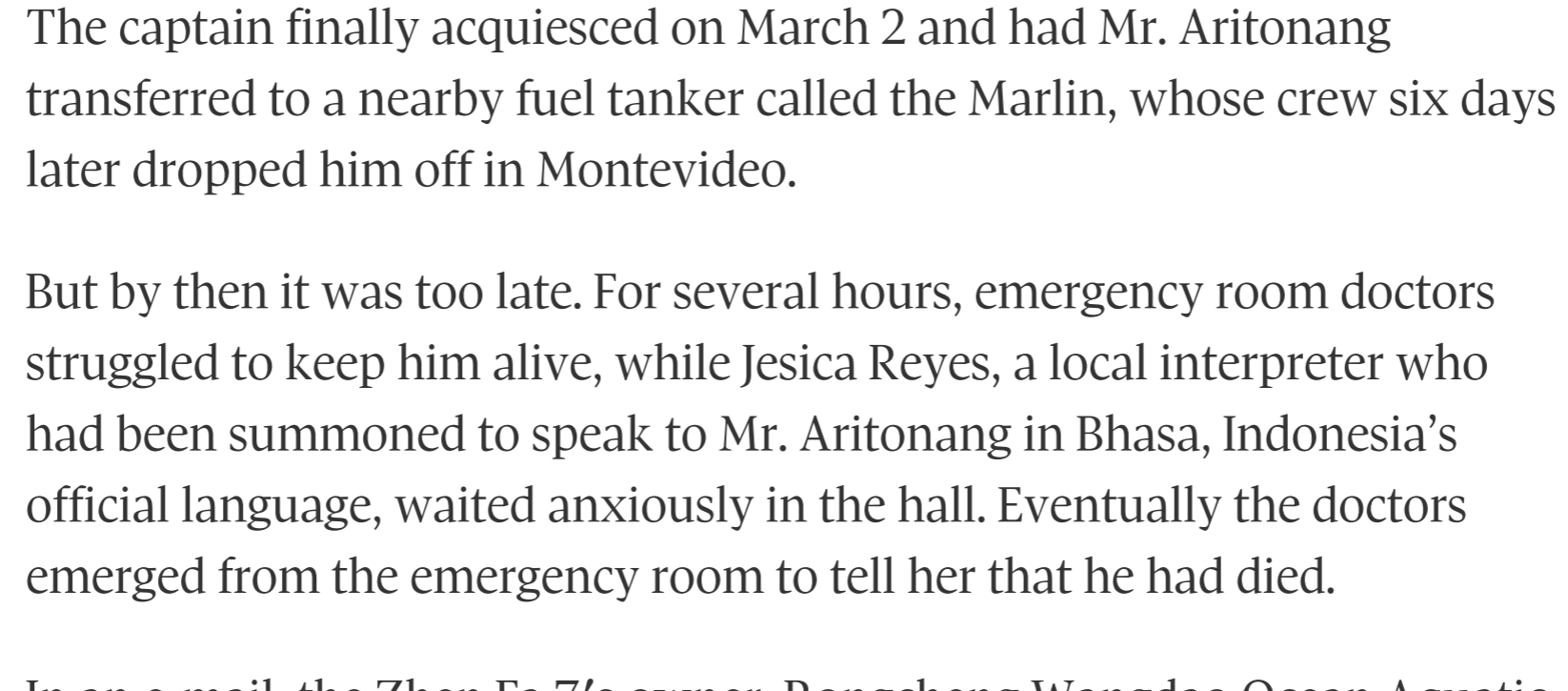
Mr. Kusmanto had been a frequent target of violence on board. His job was to carry heavy and full baskets of squid from the upper deck down to the refrigerated hold. But he often made mistakes, which spurred the wrath of Chinese officers, who beat him. "He did not dare fight back," recounted Fikran, another of the Indonesians. (Fikran, like many Indonesians, has no surname.) To avoid the ship's chef, who seemed to hit him especially often, Mr. Kusmanto skipped meals and only ate white rice, which he could serve himself during off hours.

The Indonesians began lobbying the captain to let Mr. Kusmanto off the ship, even though the contract used by his manning agency included severe financial penalties for him and his family if he quit prematurely – a provision, among several others in the contract, that labour experts say directly violated anti-trafficking laws in the U.S. and Indonesia.

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By early August, 2020, Mr. Kusmanto had become disoriented. Other Indonesian deckhands demanded that he be given medical attention. Eventually, the captain relented, and transferred him to another ship, which carried him to port in Lima, on Aug. 17. He was taken to a hospital. After Mr. Kusmanto recovered, he was flown back home on Aug. 20. (Mr. Kusmanto could not be reached for comment, despite extensive efforts.)

In December, 2020, the Zhen Fa 7 left the vicinity of the Galapagos Islands, sailed around the southern tip of South America, through the Strait of Magellan, and made its way north to an immensely productive high-seas squid fishery known as the Blue Hole, about 360 miles above the Falkland Islands. The bounty was plentiful there, and the captain began working his crew around the clock. Mr. Aritonang fell severely ill in late January with beriberi. The whites of his eyes turned yellow, his legs and feet grew swollen and achy, and he lost his appetite and ability to walk.



Daniel Aritonang had been at sea for a year and a half, when he was found dumped dockside, barely conscious, with two black eyes, bruises along the sides of his torso, and rope marks around his neck. His legs, feet and hands were bloated. He died at a hospital in Montevideo, Uruguay in March 2021.

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The other Indonesians on board begged the captain to get Mr. Aritonang onshore medical attention, but the captain refused. Later, when asked to explain the captain's refusal, Mr. Anhar, Mr. Aritonang's friend and crewmate, said, "There was still a lot of squid. We were in the middle of an operation."

By February, Mr. Aritonang could no longer stand. He moaned in pain, slipping in and out of consciousness. Incensed, the Indonesian crew threatened to strike. "We were all against the captain," Mr. Anhar said. The captain finally acquiesced on March 2 and had Mr. Aritonang transferred to a nearby fuel tanker called the Marlin, whose crew six days later dropped him off in Montevideo.

But then it was too late. For several hours, emergency room doctors struggled to keep him alive, while Jessica Reyes, a local interpreter who had been summoned to speak to Mr. Aritonang in Bhasa, Indonesia's official language, waited anxiously in the hall. Eventually the doctors emerged from the emergency room to tell her that he had died.

In an e-mail, the Zhen Fa 7's owner, Rongcheng Wangdao Ocean Aquatic Products Co. Ltd., declined to comment on Mr. Aritonang's death but said that it had found no evidence of complaints from the crew about their living or working conditions on the vessel. The company added that it had handed the matter over to the China Overseas Fisheries Association, which regulates the industry. Questions submitted to that agency went unanswered.

The Outlaw Ocean Project uncovers the tragic story of Daniel Aritonang, a young Indonesian man who set out on an adventure to work on a fishing boat at sea and stepped into what is the largest & arguably the most brutal maritime operation the world has ever known, China's deep-water fishing fleet.

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