

The preventable death of a young deckhand exposes widespread exploitation aboard Chinese fishing ships

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



Fadhil fell ill with beriberi, a preventable and reversible disease caused by a deficiency of vitamin B1, in August 2019 while working aboard Chinese squid-fishing ship, the Wei Yu 18. He died within a month of the onset of his illness.

YANSEL LIANUS SAPUTRA/HANDOUT

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.

Fadhil, a 24-year-old from Indonesia, boarded the Wei Yu 18, a Chinese squid-fishing ship, in the port of Busan, South Korea, on August 28, 2018. He joined a crew of nine other Indonesians and 20 Chinese.

The rusty red-and-white steel-hulled vessel traveled for several weeks to the coast of South America, to fish near Peru, then south along the coast of Chile. During its 22-month journey, the ship made only one port call, at Punta Arenas, Chile, the rest of the time staying hundreds of miles from shore. Working 12- to 24-hour shifts, the men on board typically slept during the day, since squid fishing occurs best at night, when extremely bright ship-mounted lightbulbs lure the creatures toward the surface.

On the ship, the men slept four to a room in wooden bunk beds, each with one blanket on a soggy foam mattress made wet by walls that sweated with condensation. The Indonesian crew members drank water that was rust coloured and tasted like metal, while their Chinese counterparts drank bottled water. They were given only salt water for bathing. Because the Indonesian deckhands were Muslims, they picked out the pork that the Chinese cook seemed to always mix into the noodles he prepared.



From left, Fadhil and fellow crew members Ramadhan Sugandhi, Frans Wiliam Imbab, and Ilham Sugito, take a group selfie on the deck of the Wei Yu 18.

RAMADHAN SUGANDHI/RAMADHAN SUGANDHI

Violence was common. Five Indonesian crew members described the ship's foreman and captain hitting them on the head and kicking and slapping them – usually for not understanding instructions given in Chinese, taking too long to untangle fishing lines or dropping squid on the deck. One Indonesian deckhand, Yansel Lianus Saputra, speculated that the foreman harbored a racial grudge against Indonesians, stemming from anti-Chinese race riots that had gripped Jakarta in 1998.

“You were only five years old,” the foreman said, according to Mr. Saputra. “Many Chinese citizens were killed in Indonesia.” The riots, sparked by food shortages and widespread unemployment, targeted ethnic Chinese people and resulted in more than 1,000 deaths and more than 160 rapes.

By August, 2019, after being at sea for over a year, the Indonesian deckhands on the Wei Yu 18 began coming down with beriberi, a preventable and reversible disease caused by a deficiency of vitamin B1.

Outlaw Ocean: Inside the deadly world of Chinese squid ships

Fadhil (who, like many Indonesians, has no surname) fell ill while the captain was not on board. He and other deckhands asked for him to be allowed to go home, or to a hospital, but the foreman refused. A copy of Fadhil's contract says that he was only required to do a one-year-at-sea tour, which he had already completed. But the foreman told Fadhil he was required to stay for two years, according to five of the other deckhands.

Fadhil began suffering from extreme thirst, then seizures and extreme fatigue. He was too tired to sit up, and he couldn't urinate. He vomited up any water or food he consumed. “Elephant feet” is how other deckhands described the swelling in his lower extremities. The foreman gave him the equivalent of ibuprofen.

“My body must reach my parents,” Fadhil whispered to Ramadhan Sugandhi, another deckhand on the ship. Within a month of the onset of his illness, Fadhil had died. Four other Indonesians on the ship who contracted beriberi survived after receiving treatment.



Fadhil's coffin in lowered into the ocean from aboard the Wei Yu 18. The captain ordered the crew of the the Chinese squid-fishing ship to build a wooden coffin for burial at sea on Sept. 26, 2019.

SUPPLIED TO THE OUTLAW OCEAN PROJECT BY A WEI YU 18 CREW MEMBER

When the captain returned to the ship, he ordered the crew to wrap Fadhil's corpse in a blanket and place it in the ship's squid freezer, where it turned black. Several days later, they put Fadhil in a wooden coffin that was weighed down by an anchor chain and pushed the box into the sea. “I felt hopeless watching him,” Mr. Sugandhi said.

In Gampong Rawa, a small coastal village on the northern tip of the island of Sumatra, about 1,500 miles northwest of Jakarta, Fadhil's relatives were presented with a reconciliation letter that they were told had been prepared for insurance reasons.

The agreement said the family had been assisted in submitting an insurance claim. Despite photos of Fadhil's burial at sea that the Indonesian crew members had stolen from a Chinese deckhand's cellphone, the letter said he had “died by falling into the sea.”



If a ship's captain refuses to let a deckhand at sea go to shore for medical care and he dies, is it murder? Fadhil's story, the dark chronicle of a Chinese squid jigger and a man trafficked onto it.

THE GLOBE AND MAIL