

Uruguay: At Port of Montevideo, A Deadly Circle of Fishing and Labor Abuses

It was the Day of the Dead when the body of Raúl Delgado’s brother was carried from the Portuguese-flagged fishing vessel the Verdemilho.

Both had been serving as ship crew members when Delgado’s brother, Celso, grew increasingly sick. Unable to speak, he lay on the floor, gasping for air.

“I had to be there with a piece of cardboard fanning him because he couldn’t breathe,” Delgado told InSight Crime.

On November 2, 2020, the boat finally docked at Uruguay’s port of Montevideo. Celso had already been dead for a day.

Between 2013 and 2021, Montevideo was the last port of call for 59 deceased fishing crew members – or one about every month and a half, according to figures provided to InSight Crime by the National Naval Prefecture ([Prefectura Nacional Naval](#)). Conservation and human rights groups have long accused the port of hosting vessels known to engage in labor abuse at sea. Crew members have been beaten, locked aboard ships, starved and forced to work for days without sleep.

They have also been refused necessary medical treatment, which is what Delgado, who is from Peru, alleges happened to his brother.

“The captain didn’t want to return to land, because what interested him most was filling the boat,” Delgado said.

A Port with a Bad Reputation

At the southern tip of the country, Uruguay's port of Montevideo serves as a clearinghouse for fishing fleets operating in the South Atlantic. Deep-sea fishing boats at the port [unloaded nearly 76,000 tons of frozen fish](#) in 2021, according to Uruguayan port administration data.

Uruguay scores quite well on international measures of IUU fishing, such as the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime’s IUU Fishing Index. According to the index, Uruguay is among the 25 best countries in the world in their efforts to counter IUU fishing.ⁱ

Yet despite this strong national record, the Montevideo port is a notorious hub for catch transferred at sea. Refrigerated cargo ships meet fishing fleets, shuttling them supplies and receiving catch. The rapacious system – called transshipment -- abets illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing practices.

A 2017 report by [Oceana](#), an international non-profit dedicated to ocean conservation, exposed the port as the [second most](#) visited by transshipment vessels.

Distant-water fishing fleets employ the transshipment system to fish for months just outside a country’s 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

Boats turn off transponders known as [automatic identification systems \(AIS\)](#), which broadcast a ship's identity and position, to illegally Hoover waters inside exclusive zones. A 2021 Oceana [study](#) examined transponder data from 800 vessels fishing within 20 nautical miles of Argentina's EEZ between January 2018 and April 2021. Just over 30 percent of the boats that shut off their AIS transponders docked at the port of Montevideo.

"The foreign fleets leave a lot of money in the port," said Mariana Silvera, an Uruguay consultant to the National Geographic program Pristine Seas.

"For that reason, it's not convenient to do things correctly and carry out inspections and controls," Silvera told InSight Crime.

IUU Fishing and Labor Abuse

Illegal fishing is known to be coupled with other crimes, particularly labor abuse at sea.

The campaign [Oceanosanos](#), which focuses on ocean conservation and illegal fishing in Uruguay, compiled a [2018 report](#) of boats accused of misconduct that docked at the port of Montevideo. Accounts included a Taiwanese fishing ship that visited the port twice in 2017 before being inspected in South Africa, where authorities documented that crew members had been "beaten, suffered mistreatment and were not paid the agreed amount."

In 2014, more than two dozen African crew members fled a Chinese fishing ship at Montevideo. They said they had been attacked with tools, and their legs showed signs of being shackled.

Various nationalities crew the vessels that dock at Montevideo, said Jessica Sparks, the associate director of the Rights Lab at the University of Nottingham, UK.

"It's a big port for vessels that are out at sea for very long periods, and that, of course, escalates risk" of abuse, Sparks told InSight Crime.

The port serves as a hub for contracting agencies that bring in crew members from Russia, Peru, Indonesia, Africa and elsewhere, said Alexis Pintos, spokesman for the National Union of Seafarers and Allied Workers in Uruguay (Sindicato Único de Trabajadores del Mar y Afines - SUNTMA).

On the rare occasions when abuse is reported, it's often to the union.

"Crew members of all nationalities have told us about having their documents confiscated, of mistreatment, of going without food," said Pintos. Little is done to counter misconduct, the SUNTMA spokesman said.

"Since the flag is not Uruguayan, we look the other way," Pintos told InSight Crime.

The Last Port of Call

Dead crew members don't speak. Investigations are rare. Delgado, though, knew his brother had died needlessly.

<https://insightcrime.org/investigations/uruguay-port-montevideo-deadly-circle-iuu-fishing-labor-abuse/>

When the Verdemilho arrived at the Montevideo port about a month before Celso's death, he had already developed a strong cough, a symptom of COVID-19. Delgado asked the captain that his brother be allowed to see a doctor, but the captain refused.

The boat returned to the Atlantic, trawling for fish. A week later, Celso's health worsened. Delgado said he wishes he had disobeyed the captain, who later told his brother when they were returning to sea that a COVID-19 diagnosis would have caused the ship to be quarantined for weeks.

Delgado has lodged a formal criminal complaint with Uruguayan authorities.

"I made the complaint because of how my brother was treated, because I don't want this to happen to other mariners -- that they die without being attended by a doctor," he said.

Western Hemisphere Regional Illegal,
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Assessment



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