

Dr Anil Sharma, the Indian link to the ship rescued by Navy from Somali pirates

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Dr Anil Sharma

MUMBAI: Indian Navy's efforts to rescue the Liberian-flagged cargo ship named MV Lila Norfolk from a hijacking bid by Somali pirates on Friday drew much applause from the global shipping community reeling under the attacks unleashed by Houthi militants on commercial ships transiting the Red Sea.

The cargo ship with 21 crew members on board, including 15 Indians, was sailing from Port Du Aco (Brazil) to Khalifa Bin Salman in Bahrain, when pirates attempted to hijack it off the coast of Somalia.

The merchant vessel sent a message on the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) portal saying five to six unknown armed personnel had boarded on the evening of January 4, an Indian Navy statement said. The Indian Navy's warship INS Chennai, maritime patrol aircraft P-8I and long-range Predator MQ9B drone, were deployed to assist the vessel and thwart the hijack attempt.

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MV Lila Norfolk is owned by Lila Global, a dry bulk and tanker shipping company with a fleet of some 40 ships, and the shipping owning unit of Dubai-based Global Marketing Systems Inc (GMS), the world's largest buyer of ships and offshore assets for recycling, founded by Indian born Dr Anil Sharma.

In December, Sharma was named in the 'Lloyd's List Top 100 Most Influential People in Shipping Industry' for the 14th consecutive year, making him the only Indian origin person to achieve this feat in every edition since 2010.

London-based Lloyd's List is one of the world's oldest and most respected maritime publications. The Lloyd's List Top 100 most influential people in shipping is a significant feature that celebrates key figures who make a substantial impact in the maritime world.

The recognition places Dr Sharma amongst an elite group of only seven individuals worldwide who have consistently been recognized in all 14 editions of the list, showcasing his enduring influence and leadership in the global maritime sector.

Under Dr Sharma's leadership, GMS has played a pivotal role in advocating for and implementing sustainable ship recycling practices. His efforts have been instrumental in the ratification of the Hong Kong Convention (HKC) across the Indian sub-continent, marking a significant milestone in the industry's journey towards environmental stewardship.

The Hong Kong International Convention for the Safe and Environmentally Sound Recycling of Ships, adopted by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), the UN agency tasked with regulating global shipping, will finally enter into force in June 2025 after Bangladesh — the world's largest ship recycling nation by capacity — and Liberia ratified the convention in 2023.

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The treaty will enter into force 24 months after three separate criteria have been met: It must be ratified by 15 states (maritime nations); these states must represent 40 per cent of world merchant shipping by gross tonnage; they should have a combined maximum annual ship recycling volume (during the preceding 10 years) of not less than 3 percent of their combined gross tonnage.

These conditions have now been met with Bangladesh and Liberia separately depositing the instrument of accession with the IMO in June 2023.

The Convention took 16 years to enter into force, offering a glimpse into the challenges it faced from maritime nations.

India, one of the world's five top ship recycling nations, acceded to the Convention in November 2019. The treaty sets global standards for safe and environmentally-sound ship recycling.

Dr Sharma's leadership extends beyond GMS to Lila Global, a ship-owning company with a growing fleet focused on enhancing the efficiency of mid-life ships. His philosophy of extending the lifespan of vessels aligns with the industry's broader environmental goals and showcases innovative strategies to address global maritime challenges.

"Being part of this esteemed list for 14 years, alongside a select few, is not just a personal honour, but a testament to our team's dedication at GMS and Lila Global. It reflects our collective efforts to build cross-sector collaboration and develop tangible approaches to reducing emissions and promoting sustainable practices in maritime trade," Dr Sharma said on the achievement.

With its forward-thinking leadership and commitment to sustainable practices, Lila Global is set to continue its trajectory as a trailblazer in the maritime industry under Dr Sharma's stewardship.

"This recognition from Lloyd's List is not about individual achievements but about the collaborative efforts to steer the industry towards a sustainable future," Dr Sharma added. "It's a celebration of collective willpower and commitment to making a meaningful difference."

What began as an academic curiosity in the early 1990's, when Dr Sharma, a professor in Maryland, followed the lifecycle of old U.S. Navy ships from the World War era, quickly grew into the indispensable maritime service provider it is today – the world's largest buyer of ships and offshore assets for recycling.

"Dr Sharma's story celebrates Indian innovation and influence in a global arena. It's a narrative about perseverance, leadership, and the far-reaching impact of one individual's contributions to a critical global industry," said a shipping industry executive.

GMS, along with Lila Global, anticipates a dynamic year ahead, with sustainable ship recycling and responsible fleet management at the forefront of their operations. The companies' progressive approaches, combined with Dr Sharma's foresight and leadership, position them at the forefront of the industry's transformative journey.