

Panofi Seiner Released, Innocent Passage Proven

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A Panofi owned Ghanaian purse seiner that was detained by the Liberian Coastguard on January 14th was released 4 days later, when it was proven that the vessel was on "innocent passage" through Liberia's EEZ. Ghana's Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture has clarified that no charges are being brought against the tuna purse seiner or the owning company, releasing electronic monitoring data and an observer report to support its statements.

Following reports from anti-poaching group Sea Shepherd, which was involved with the interception of the vessel, Panofi Forerunner, earlier this month, *Atuna* reported that the purse seiner had been apprehended for illegal fishing in Liberian waters, found with 700 tons of tuna onboard. It had been stated by Sea Shepherd that the vessel was fishing without a license, and using FADs, which meant it may face fines of up to USD 11 million.

However, Panofi has reacted strongly to the reports, defending the operations of its seiner, and clarifying that it was at no fault. The company stresses the vessel was on innocent passage through Liberian territorial waters with all fishing gear stowed down and with a National Fisheries Observer onboard. Subsequently the vessel was released on January 18th, with no charges being made.

Ghana's Minister of Fisheries has published an extensive press release on the matter, noting that in the early hours of January 15th, the Monitoring Control and Surveillance Division (MCSD) of the Fisheries Commission (FC) received information from the management of Panofi Company Ltd., of its inability to contact its vessel, Panofi Forerunner, which is flagged to Ghana. It was passing through Liberian waters after fishing in the high seas, it is stated, and the lack of communication led Panofi to presume the seiner was under attack "by criminals at sea".

It is further explained and shown that prior to the entry of the Panofi Forerunner in Liberian waters, Panofi submitted an entry-exit notification by email to the Liberian Fisheries Bureau, which was followed by a telephone conversation to confirm the notification. In response to reports that stated the vessel was fishing illegally, the Ministry has released EMS and AIS data from the seiner, showing that electronic monitoring remained functional during the fishing trip, despite there being allegations its AIS had been switched off. It also shows that no fishing activity took place in the EEZ.

"Regarding the claim of illegal deployment and fishing on FADs, there is evidence that nine FADs which are trackable electronically had been deployed between August 25th 2017 and December 2nd 2017, in various locations on the high seas, but have drifted into Liberian waters by means of sea currents," the Ghanaian Fisheries Ministry points out.

An observer report from the vessel, which the Ministry has also included in its release, notes there was intimidation of the master and crew, which were forced to return and pick up one of the FADs in question, which is stated to have been deployed on August 25th. The Ministry and Panofi go on to firmly deny any claims that the crew had tried to bribe officers, which had been reported previously by Sea Shepherd.

Since the seiner was released four days after its detainment, fisheries inspectors of the MCSD have conducted inspection, and interviewed the crew, with the Ghanaian officials noting that no infractions were found in terms of the Panofi Forerunner. They have stated however that "the crew were unduly harassed by the Liberian Coastguard and Sea Shepherd."

It is added that "it is evident that the Liberian Coastguard and Sea Shepherd, under the guise of enforcing fisheries laws, have turned the Liberian coastal waters into a dangerous crime zone, where foreign fishing boats and their crew are unduly harassed. The unwarranted abuse of the freedom of navigation and human rights requires to be thoroughly investigated and must be brought to the attention" of international bodies.

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