

## On the front lines

A fisherman continues his small war in the East Sea as regional tensions rise

By AN DIEN

China's recent attack on a state-owned vessel in the East Sea has sparked broad public outrage.

The act attracted broad condemnation from Vietnamese diplomats and newspapers.

But the conflict is not new to captain Mai Phung Luu and his family, who live on the front lines of Vietnam's fight for the sea.

Last September, Chinese patrol boats took Luu and his crew prisoner off the shores of the Hoang Sa (Paracel) Archipelago where he has fished for the past 30 years.

It was the fourth time in six years that the Chinese had taken his freedom and his boat. During their one-month ordeal, Luu said he and his crew were scraps from their captors' table. He further claimed that they were routinely beaten.

On October 11, 2010 Chinese officials announced they had released the nine Vietnamese fishermen and their boat one day ahead of a high-profile regional security meeting in Hanoi.

In reality, Luu and his crew had been set out to sea without navigational equipment or communication devices.

Their engine broke down and they spent several days adrift at sea until a Chinese vessel towed them to an island, where they weathered a typhoon. Finally, on October 26, a Vietnamese patrol boat returned them to their home on an island off the central province of Quang Ngai.

Their troubles didn't end there.

Luu returned to a mountain of debt. He was forced to sell his vessel—the family's sole meal ticket—and remains saddled with debts totaling some VND600 million.

The fisherman could not be reached on the phone on Wednesday.

"He's back to sea," his daughter Mai Thi Bich Hue, 21, told *Thanh Nien Weekly* on the phone. "He has been hired to work for local boat fishing in Malaysian and Filipino waters."

Her two brothers joined him on the boat.

Hue's husband found work on a boat bound for the Truong Sa (Spratly) Archipelago.

When the men put out to sea, again, they left Hue, her younger sister, and her mother alone.

The young woman has suffered greatly from the ordeal. She took on odd jobs to support the family. In March, she lost her unborn child to a miscarriage.

"I know I shouldn't have worked too hard. But I had no choice and neither did my family," Hue said. "We desperately need money to pay off my father's debts and buy a new boat."

Hue said that before Luu went out to sea nearly a month ago, he remained determined to fight for the islands.

"He has vowed to return to Hoang Sa," she said. "He says there's no reason to be afraid of fishing in our own waters."

Hue and her mother, however, remain worried.

"We always worry whenever my husband puts out to sea," Luu's wife Pham Thi Lan said. "This time our worries have mounted as the Chinese appear to be increasingly aggressive and cruel."

"But I know my husband well. He is too stubborn to give up," Lan said.

Upon his return from sea, Luu described the threatened islands as "flesh and blood" to reporters and insisted that abandoning them would disgrace his ancestors.

Despite her myriad sacrifices, Hue remains equally stoic.

"We are scared of the Chinese and their brutality," she said. "But it doesn't mean fishermen like my dad are afraid to fish in both Truong Sa and Hoang Sa."



PHOTO BY VNA

Captain Mai Phung Luu and his wife were re-united at Quang Ngai Province's Dung Quat Port last October. Luu, who has been fishing in Vietnam's Hoang Sa (Paracel) Archipelago for 30 years, has maintained that there's no reason to be afraid of fishing in his own waters.

# Maritime expe



Fishermen unloading tunas in the central province of Binh Thuan. On Sunday, Vietnam condemned China for increasing regional tensions and said it would do everything necessary to protect its territorial integrity after Chinese patrol boats "interfered with" a Vietnamese oil and gas survey ship in the East Sea.

PHOTO BY NGOC OANH

## International experts condemn China for disrupting Vietnam's legal marine activities and urged the country to be better prepared for the next encounter.

By MINH HUNG

International experts have condemned China for its recent violations of Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Despite wide criticism from members of the public and local officials, Chinese ships continue to hassle Vietnamese fishermen and research vessels.

On May 26, three Chinese patrol boats illegally entered Vietnamese waters and violently disrupted a routine seismic survey being conducted by a state-owned gas company.

Three days later, members of Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a public demand for China to immediately cease its violations of Vietnam's

sovereignty over its continental shelf and EEZ.

"China's actions appear unprecedented. Vietnam has the right under international law to conduct oil exploration activities within its Exclusive Economic Zone," Carl Thayer, a Vietnam specialist at the Australian Defense Force Academy, told *Thanh Nien Weekly*.

On Tuesday, the Viking 2 a Norwegian-flagged ship hired by PetroVietnam's Technical Services Corporation (PTSC) encountered a pair of Chinese ships well inside Vietnam's EEZ—the 200 mile marine border extending out from Vietnam's coastline.

The Chinese patrol vessels attempted to approach the Viking

2's rear deck but were blocked by the vessel's security escorts.

Thayer said that Vietnam should be careful not to overreact or provoke the Chinese. But, he said, the country should be better prepared for such encounters.

"Vietnam would help its case if it filmed incidents of this nature, broadcast them on national TV, and made copies available to the press and diplomatic corps," he said. "Vietnam needs to prepare a good information strategy."

He also said the incident calls for greater efforts on Vietnam's part to monitor its EEZ and provide stronger escorts for its exploration vessels.

"This means stepped up air patrols. Vietnam might have to