

BATTLE FOR  
SRI LANKA'S  
ECONOMY

# ASIAWEEK

MARCH 10, 1989

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CANADA \$8.00  
CHINA 10.00  
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HONG KONG 6.00  
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INDONESIA 6.00  
JAPAN 10.00  
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MALAYSIA 6.00  
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NEW ZEALAND 6.00  
PHILIPPINES 6.00  
SINGAPORE 6.00  
THAILAND 6.00  
U.S.A. 12.00

## A DROPPED BOMB

Now, a

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS



Marissa Roth

Two Vietnamese survivors: Less than half lived through the 37-day ordeal

### TRIALS

## Cannibals on the High Seas

The prosecutor displayed pictures of a floating corpse and of emaciated figures huddled on a leaking junk. He called witnesses who testified that the boat's occupants, Vietnamese fleeing in the hope of getting to the U.S., had died at the rate of two a day. Then he described how survivors ate some of the bodies and actually killed others for food. The defendant? Not one of the murderers, but an American naval captain who had sighted the junk adrift in the South China Sea before those grisly events happened. He had given supplies but refused to take the people on board his ship. The court martial hearing, which took place at the American naval base at Subic Bay in the Philippines, found Captain Alexander Balian, 48, guilty of dereliction of duty.

The story began on May 22 last year when 110 passengers, who had each paid an ounce of gold for the privilege, boarded an ageing fifteen-metre junk in Ben Tre, west of Ho Chi Minh City. After three days, the engine broke down. As they began to drift, 33-year-old Dong Quang Minh, a former corporal in the pre-1975

fourteenth day, was a woman named Xuan. Minh noted that 24 others drowned while trying to swim to passing ships.

On the nineteenth day, seven more died. But there was a ray of hope as the U.S.S. *Dubuque*, an American amphibious landing ship, came into sight. An officer and a Vietnamese-speaking crew member went out to the junk in a dinghy and took food and water, but told the refugees they could not be rescued because the *Dubuque* was on a "dangerous mission" (it was en route to support U.S. action in the Persian Gulf). The *Dubuque* sailed away, leaving the becalmed junk about 370 km north of the Philippine island of Palawan.

Minh and his men commandeered the supplies. Related one survivor afterwards: "He kept all the food and water and later gave it out little by little." Minh said in his statement that he had done this because of fights over the food. In any case, it was all gone by the 25th day at sea. Three days after that, said Minh, they pulled a very weak Dao Huu Cuong out of the boat's cabin and held him in the sea until he drowned. They cut

drowned and ate an ailing boy. Five days later they decided to starve to death. "Sensing this," said Minh, "Qui jumped into the sea to seek the protection of his cousin. I dragged him out and my cousin had no time in plunging him into the sea. It took us 20 minutes to kill him. We ate the best cuts." Next day they were spotted by fishermen from Bolinao in the northern Philippines. They were taken ashore. There were just 10 left.

The survivors' account of the ordeal, rescued by the *Dubuque* and the subsequent cannibalism created a national furore. Balian was removed from command and charged with dereliction of duty. At the Feb. 13-24 court martial, a jury of six naval captains dismissed Balian, finding that he had ordered the off ropes when they tried to rescue the refugees and that he had failed to rescue the refugee. But they found him guilty of not properly assisting the refugees and ordered him an official reprimand.

In court, Balian said his superior officer told him the refugees were dying and their voices were strong. He said he told him the junk was leaking and the engine was not working. Balian said officers' report, he donated supplies to the refugees — "enough to feed 60 three meals a day for a week," he said. The prosecutor, however, said the supplies were "under no circumstances enough for the refugees to survive." He testified that if he had known the true condition he would have rescued them. Added he: "That's what I would have done in previous occasions."



Balian: A scapegoat?

Balian said he had been made responsible for the goat and "hung up" because the incident was "politically motivated." Some of the survivors opposed Balian's execution. Earlier, Balian said: "Captain Balian was good enough to give us food and water. 40 to 50 other people died because of none of them." Another survivor said: "The American navy was all dying. We were all dying. We just turned and sailed away." Minh said he had exploited the case for himself. "Minh and I do eye," said the captain. "He is