



Artist turns gun cartridges into a filigree sculpture

PAGE 7



The 2023 Games of the Small States of Europe get under way this evening with a spectacular opening ceremony at the Floriana Granaries. Over 1,000 athletes from nine European countries will be competing in the Games, with Team Malta hopeful of attaining its best-ever result during the week-long event. PHOTO: MATTHEW MIRABELLI

Electrogas posts first profit of €19.1m

JACOB BORG

Electrogas has turned its first multi-million profit since it first started supplying gas and electricity to Enemalta.

Its 2021 accounts, published last month, show the consortium made a profit of €19.1 million, compared to a €56 million loss in 2020. Prior to that, it had incurred losses of €15 million in 2019, €32 million in 2018 and €23 million in 2017.

Company directors said in their annual report that, given the most recent financial projections, Electrogas's financial performance and operating cash flow in subsequent years is expected to improve.

Electrogas bought €136 million worth of gas from its shareholder, SOCAR, Azerbaijan's state-owned

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Ship cocaine bust should exonerate El Hiblu Three, defence lawyer says

Owner calls himself a 'Libyan pirate' on Facebook

JAMES CUMMINGS

The ship at the centre of a case involving three young men facing highly-contested terrorism charges is at the centre of a massive cocaine bust and 'flag-hopping' in develop-

ments that the defence lawyer said should completely exonerate his clients.

The cargo ship involved in the El Hiblu Three case in 2019 was caught smuggling almost €76 million worth of cocaine two years later while operating under a different name, it has recently emerged.

Meanwhile, the owner of the vessel describes himself on Facebook as a 'Libyan pirate'.

According to Aditus director and human rights lawyer, Neil Falzon the drug-trafficking activities of the vessel and its suspicious behaviour, even before the alleged 2019 terrorism case, call into question the

reliability of the testimonies given by the owner and other members of the El Hiblu 1 crew.

In 2019, 'Amara', 'Kader' and 'Abdalla' were among 108 migrants who boarded a nine-metre dinghy from Libya to cross the Mediterranean. As the rubber boat started to deflate and sink, a merchant vessel, El Hiblu 1, rescued them.

Shortly after the rescue, the vessel was instructed to take the migrants back to Libya.

But the migrants on board ordered the crew to sail the ship to Malta instead. The three youths – then aged 15, 16 and 19 – were arrested and subsequently charged, with

prosecutors claiming they were the ringleaders when the ship was taken over.

The three say they only acted as mediators and translators for the rest of the ship's passengers. International pressure has since been mounting on the attorney general to drop the charges.

Falzon said the latest developments change everything.

"It confirms our suspicions that the El Hiblu operators are a bunch of ruthless criminals. It confirms our fears that Malta's case against our clients is entirely based on statements made by a gang of pirates. Ultimately, it confirms our clients'

story that they were the victims of a twisted scheme.

"The question is now: why is Malta pursuing this case against these three young men?"

According to a fellow defence lawyer specialising in maritime law who is also representing the three youths, Cedric Mifsud, the ship's owner would have been aware of where the vessel is and what it is doing.

"Usually, it's the owner that directs the crew," he said, adding that it was not unusual in merchant shipping for the captain and crew of a boat to change periodically.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

NATIONAL



A photo taken aboard the *Nehir* during the cocaine bust in 2021. PHOTO: SPANISH POLICE. Right: The owner of the *El Hiblu 1*, later renamed the *Nehir*, calls himself a "Libyan pirate" on social media. PHOTO: FACEBOOK



Vessel's flag changed four times

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

The ship, renamed the *Nehir*, was found to be carrying over 1.8 tonnes of cocaine – with an approximate street value of €76 million – after being intercepted by the Spanish police at the entrance to the Bay of Biscay in February 2021.

Spanish authorities had been alerted to a ship matching the *Nehir*'s description by Colombian colleagues who suspected it could be carrying up to three tonnes of the illicit substance.

After disabling its tracking device the previous month in the Northwest African port of Nouadhibou, the site of various drugs seizures over the years, the vessel is thought to have proceeded to South America before heading to Europe.

Its destination is believed to have been the Galician port of Vilagarcía de Arousa, where local authorities had been informed that members of narco group the Vilagarcía clan were awaiting a shipment from Columbia.

Despite attempts by the crew to sink the vessel once they

realised they were being intercepted, the Spanish police managed to recover the illegal cargo and take the crew into custody before later towing the vessel to a nearby port where it has remained under guard since.

'LIBYAN PIRATE'

While the ship was manned by a different crew on each occasion, the vessel's owner, Salah Ali Mohammed El Hiblu, who describes himself on Facebook as a 'Libyan pirate', was also its owner when it was called the *El Hiblu 1*.

His brother, Nader is understood to have been in command onboard the *El Hiblu 1* and later testified that the teenagers had acted aggressively, though admitted no violence had taken place.

While records show the vessel was only acquired by El Hiblu in 2019, in a court hearing the same year he indicated he had been involved with the vessel four years before that.

"I built the ship in 2015 in Turkey," he told the court, according to media reports.

El Hiblu did not answer summons to appear in court in the case of the *Nehir*.

SWAPPING FLAGS

Since the ship's registration in 2015 – four years before the alleged hijacking – the vessel underwent four changes of flag, according to Spanish court documents.

Flying a Turkish flag when built, the ship was changed to a Palau flag in 2019, the day before the *El Hiblu Three* incident. The vessel reverted to a Turkish flag in September 2020 before being changed yet again two months later to a Palau flag in November the same year.

According to the US authorities, frequently changing flag, or 'flag-hopping', is viewed as a suspicious practice. "Bad actors may falsify the flag of their vessels to mask illicit trade. They may also repeatedly register with new flag states ('flag hopping') to avoid detection," the US authorities said in a document entitled *Guidance to Address Illicit Shipping and Sanctions Evasion Practices*.

In March, the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) named the Palau flag, a so-called 'flag of convenience', as one of the "worst flags operating in the Mediterranean Sea".

"These flags take money from shipowners to register ships that other countries wouldn't touch," said ITF inspectorate coordinator Steve Trowsdale.

Journalists from Investigative Reporting Project Italy (IRPI) first linked the *El Hiblu 1* and the *Nehir* in a series of articles published last month, with defence lawyers in the *El Hiblu 3* case being made aware of the findings last week.

WHAT HAPPENED IN MARCH 2019?

In March 2019, the *El Hiblu 1* rescued 108 migrants on a rubber boat who were at risk of drowning in the Mediterranean.

After realising they were being taken back to Libya – a country criticised by the United Nations, the US State Department and Amnesty International for its

track record of human rights abuses against refugees – the 108 migrants panicked and protested the move.

During the protest, none of the crew were injured and the ship remained undamaged, with the three teenagers acting as mediators due to their English language skills.

Witnesses said the three had stepped in to calm the situation and were subsequently beckoned to the bridge by the captain.

Upon their arrival in Malta, the three were arrested on charges of terrorism and hijacking and detained for seven months.

Since then, they have lived in limbo while they wait for their case to be decided.

Should they be convicted, they face up to 30 years in jail.

Last year, more than 1,000 people, including President Emeritus Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, signed an open letter to the attorney general insisting that the case be dropped and demanding the trio's immediate release.

'Cash flow expected to improve'

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

energy company in 2021. A five-year deal that saw Electrogas supply gas to Enemalta at a fixed price ended last year.

The company acknowledged that its exposure to variable market prices is offset by cash received from sales to Enemalta. Costs for these gas purchases are passed on to the state-owned energy provider.

The government's deal with Electrogas is being scrutinised by parliament's public spending watchdog. Former Electrogas director, Yorgen Fenech was

summoned to testify by the parliamentary committee last week. His testimony was, however, postponed due to the pending criminal charges over his alleged role in journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia's assassination.

Caruana Galizia was killed by a bomb placed under her car in October 2017. Fenech denies any involvement in the plot, though investigators have identified the Electrogas project as a potential motive for the murder.

The former Electrogas director owned an offshore company that planned to funnel large payments to Panama

companies owned by former government officials Konrad Mizzi and Keith Schembri, according to a leaked e-mail.

Mizzi and Schembri deny wrongdoing. They were both banned from travelling to the US in December 2021 due to suspicions of corruption in the power station deal.

Former director Paul Apap Bologna resigned from the Electrogas board in 2021 after *Times of Malta* exposed his ownership of a similar company to Fenech's.

A magisterial inquiry into Fenech's company 17 Black is still ongoing.



Electrogas has reported its first profit since it started supplying electricity and gas to Enemalta.