

## Shipping Alliance Calls for Solution to Crew Change Shutdown

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An alliance of leading maritime companies is calling on governments around the world to make interim arrangements for crew changes, which have been effectively halted in many localities due to the COVID-19 lockdown. At present, over 100,000 seafarers are effectively stuck at sea because the global patchwork of coronavirus policies prevent them from entering countries, transiting through non-destination countries or finding flights on which to return home. This has implications for seafarer wellbeing, safety and the operational integrity of the supply chain, the alliance warns.

The alliance represents 1,500 vessels and 70,000 seafarers, and it includes leading names like D/S Norden, Grieg Star, Reederei Nord, Dynacom, V.Group, Wilhelmsen Ships Service, Pacific Carriers Limited (PCL), Magsaysay, Augustea, Columbia Ship Management, Inchcape Shipping Services and Synergy Group. The group's proposals have support from the International Chamber of Shipping and the International Transport Workers' Federation.

“We understand Covid-19 is a black swan event. But measures aimed at protecting society were never intended to prevent key workers from carrying out tasks essential to the ongoing wellbeing of society. These policies were also not intended to be detrimental to the welfare of key workers such as seafarers,” said Capt. Rajesh Unni, head of Synergy Group. “Our collective aim as responsible owners and managers employing tens of thousands of seafarers is to pursue every means possible to get crew back to their families.”

“Prolonged periods of service onboard will ultimately result in a significant increase in mental wellbeing issues among the seafaring community,” said V.Group CEO Graham Westgarth. “We should also be aware of the negative impact it will have on their families. Ultimately, such a situation can only jeopardise the safety of the individuals and potentially the vessels they sail on.

Over 1.6 million seafarers keep the world’s merchant fleet running, and about 100,000 of them need to rotate on and off every month in accordance with employment contracts and international conventions, including the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC). The alliance's members believe that collective crew changes at a small number of identified ports are a feasible short-term goal (with port state assistance). The proposed ports for these changes include Singapore, Houston, Rotterdam, Gibraltar, Jebel Ali, Fujairah, Hong Kong and Shanghai.

The alliance believes that collective crew changes can be managed at minimal risk. “Matters such as access to airlines and airports and immigration clearances are political decisions,” alliance members said a joint statement. “The shipping industry and seafarers are now relying on the world’s politicians to respect their human rights and protect their welfare in these difficult times. Seafarers are key workers and they should be classified as such and their plight addressed with all expediency.”

Keith Obeyesekera, the managing director of Reederei Nord B.V., said that governments should recognize seafaring as an essential service and give seafarers special status for travel and visa issuance. “Currently, in some instances, crew members requiring urgent medical attention have not been allowed ashore, or have not been allowed to sign off in their own home countries,” he said.