

Shipping groups make plea to help fatigued crews go home

Tens of thousands of mariners are stranded because of coronavirus restrictions. Shipping organisations and seafarers' unions have pleaded for governments to make travel easier for ships' crews after coronavirus restrictions at ports and a lack of international flights left thousands of mariners stranded on vessels long after they were due to be relieved. The International Chamber of Shipping, representing ship owners and operators, and the International Transport Workers' Federation, representing the world's 1.5m commercial seafarers, this month jointly appealed to a series of UN agencies for help. In their letter to the International Labour Organization, the International Maritime Organization, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, and the World Health Organization, the two groups asked for seafarers to be given "appropriate exemptions" from travel restrictions and for them to be treated with "pragmatism and understanding" when travelling to and from their ships. There are normally about 100,000 changeovers of seafarers a month around the world, meaning that tens of thousands of seafarers are already stranded by the crisis. Some shipping industry professionals argue that it is vital to continue changeovers of crews on vessels to avoid mental and physical fatigue for mariners and to allow them to see their families. Seafarers — many of whom are from poorer Asian countries such as the Philippines, Bangladesh and India — typically spend three to nine months on board a vessel before being relieved. They then spend around the same amount of time in their home country.

Rajesh Unni, chief executive of Synergy Marine Group, a Singapore-based ship manager that supplies crews for many commercial ships, said that "carefully managed" crew changes at designated ports could help to tackle the crisis. He said that, as things stood, thousands of seafarers were now stuck on ships unable to return home. The problems are forcing many shipping companies to ask mariners to continue working after the expiration of their contracts, sailing on to new destinations after the port where they were scheduled to disembark refused to allow them to do so or cancelled flights meant it would be impossible to travel home as planned. "In many ports, crew changes are simply prohibited," Mr Unni said.

Authorities at some ports are forcing vessels to spend a 14-day quarantine period at anchor before entering port, while there were also challenges in many places in bringing fresh food supplies on to ships. "This is a safety issue and it's a mental health issue," added Mr Unni. Some ship operators have decided that the challenges of changing over crews are so great that it is safer to keep the current crew on board. Denmark's Maersk Line, operator of the world's largest containership fleet, said on March 17 that it was suspending all crew changeovers for at least four weeks to keep crews safe. A group of mariners on board Maersk's Gjertrud Maersk tested positive for Covid-19 on March 23 and have been taken to hospital in the Chinese port city of Ningbo. Oldendorff Carriers, an operator of dry bulk carriers based in Hamburg, has also said it is keeping existing crews on board. Henrik Jensen, managing director of Danica Crewing Services, a Hamburg-based supplier of crews for vessels, said seafarers were at less risk from spending longer than planned at sea than from travelling and contracting the virus. "What really concerns me is what will happen to an infected seafarer onboard," Mr Jensen said. "No commercial vessels are equipped to deal with a crew member seriously ill from Covid-19 who may be in need of ventilation and intensive care." The International Maritime Organisation and other UN bodies overseeing worldwide rules about seafarer health have not yet produced a comprehensive policy on how to ensure ships can continue operating amid the virus outbreak.