

# India needs to operate special flights for seafarers: Synergy Marine



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Mumbai, Jun 21 (PTI) India, which is one of the three largest suppliers of seafarers, needs to mount special flights to port cities like Singapore, Rotterdam and Hong Kong to help facilitate crew changes amid coronavirus pandemic, a senior industry executive has said.

Around 40 per cent of Indian seafarers have completed their contracts but are still on the ships, with majority of them on cargo ships across various ports on extended contract due to visa restrictions and non-availability of flights, according to the industry estimates.

The problem has become more challenging in the wake of International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) allowing the seafarers to return home after the deadline for repatriation of crew working beyond their agreed contract period - following the IMO (International Maritime Organisation) protocol - got

over on June 15, said Rajesh Unni, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of ship services management company, Synergy Marine Group.

"Enough is enough; you have the right to return home," the London-based ITF advised seafarers after the expiry of the deadline.

According to the industry estimates, 20,000 seafarers signed on and off ships which called Indian ports or vessels that were diverted to Cochin anchorage for crew change since the lockdown.

And approximately 20,000 still need to be signed off once their relievers are able to reach ships at whichever port they are in during this period.

But there are two major roadblocks, which we have been asking the government of the major seafarer supplying nations to look into since the beginning of COVID crisis, said Unni, adding 'visa consulates in some of the countries are shut and also there are no flight services'.

"We need governments, especially the major crew supply governments, to streamline airline permitting and crew visas and create pathways so crew can return home or join ships,' Unni said.

It may be mentioned here that international flight services to and from India are shut since the last week of March in the wake of the pandemic.

Meanwhile, Minister of State Civil Aviation Hardeep Singh Puri had on Saturday ruled out any possibility of resumption of these services anytime soon.

The decision to resume regular international operations will be taken as soon as countries ease restrictions on the entry of foreign nationals and globally the situation is far from normal, Puri said at a media conference.

'We have been saying this is a ticking time bomb for a long time but politicians have been dithering. Solutions to this problem have been developed by the shipping industry. We have shown the world, via safe corridors, that change-overs can be implemented in a safe and controlled manner. But the bottleneck is the government interface,' Unni said.

In early March, Synergy had mooted the idea of a safe corridor for seafarers to facilitate crew changes and also formed an alliance of leading maritime companies in April to push for collective crew changes, he added.

Besides, it also participated in the Singapore Crew Change Working Group. Following this, on June 6, it carried out a full crew change in Singapore using

the new guidelines developed by the industry and authorities, allowing seafarers completing their contract period to disembark.

There are two big bottlenecks for these seafarers to return home. First the consulates in these countries are completely closed, so even if there are ports opened up in Europe, they are not going to get visas, Unni said.

'Therefore we are pushing very hard at the European Union level, through the ITF that at least visa-on-arrival facility should be allowed for the time being. Since the seafarers have the key workers status then you should at least facilitate crew changes.

"Seafarers are essential key workers but they're not being treated as such and now this has become an acute crisis,' he said.

Then flight services to these port cities are also not available, which is another major hindrance in the repatriation of the crew he said.

'Our suggestion is that you should operate at least two flights each per day to cities such as Singapore, Hong Kong, Gibraltar and Rotterdam, among others and let shipping companies apply for seats,' Unni said.

Singapore, Rotterdam, Houston, Gibraltar, are some of the ports across where crew change largely takes place.