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## Synergy disappointed with IMO's role during crisis with stranded seafarers

Too much talk and not enough action. That is the essence of Synergy Group CEO Rajesh Unni's criticism of the IMO. He does not think the IMO did enough to avoid the crisis caused by the lack of crew changes. ShippingWatch met him in Copenhagen.



| Photo: Synergy

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The IMO and other decision-makers have not done their job well enough to avoid the severe and escalating crew change crisis around the world. A situation that has in some cases led to desperation on board vessels, says Rajesh Unni, CEO and founder of ship management company Synergy Group. In his view, it was all talk and no action that left the ship managers and carriers with the responsibility to deal with a humanitarian problem that should have been taken care of months ago.

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RAJESH UNNI, CEO AND FOUNDER, SYNERGY GROUP

Still today, he explains, ships often do not even know if they can call upon a port if the vessel has a crew member onboard that is infected with Covid-19, and it may have to wait for long to bring people ashore. "Already in early March, it was quite obvious it was a ticking bomb. I am disappointed with the IMO and other international bodies that they were vocal but not very executing," Unni tells ShippingWatch.

### **Joint venture with Norden**

Synergy Group manages over 300 vessels and has encountered a myriad of challenges to bring crews and inspectors onboard and to repatriate seafarers and officers, many of which have been described by competitors and individual carriers. With a few exceptions, carriers and ship management companies believe politicians and port authorities have been unable to deliver the needed framework to avoid disruptions of the supply chain and above all the ability to change crews.

For instance, Synergy has set up its own quarantine scheme where seafarers can stay for 14 days to be certain they do not bring Covid-19 virus with them. And the company has chartered flights together with other maritime stakeholders that find themselves with posed with the same challenge of canceled commercial flights.

Together with competitors such as V.Ships and a series of carriers like Norden, Synergy established an alliance in May to promote the importance of keeping ports safe and open. ICS did produce a set of guidelines that were addressed to regulators with the aim of establishing a global and uniform scheme, but in spite of efforts from huge ports like Singapore and Hong Kong, it has been impossible to achieve even a base scenario of selected ports that allow crew changes.

### **80 percent of ports closed**

Recently, CEO of Ship Management company V.Ships, Franck Kayser, explained how around 80 percent of important ports in Asia are de facto closed because of a surge in coronavirus, or more specifically, because the many restrictions, faked health declarations or slowness are making it impossible for the company to change crews.



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That picture was recognized by CEO of Anglo-Eastern, Bjørn Højgaard, who criticized politicians for failing to act in spite of a united industry crying for action.

"Overall, the industry has to fend for itself. We have long tried to call on politicians, but our calls have not been heard. I'm afraid that seafarers are nearing a breaking-point," he said.

Unni agrees that among the seafarers who have worked for over a year at sea, there are individuals who are close to their breaking point.

"It is a fact that there is Covid-19 onboard ships. We still need a protocol for how ships can enter ports and off-load. Commercial flights are restricted and consulates shut down, which impedes consulates from issuing visas. We have asked the IMO what to do about that," he says.

### **IMO calls for action**

In a statement sent to ShippingWatch, the IMO says that the organization often has urged governments to act on the crew change crisis.

"IMO, in coordination with other UN entities as well as NGOs such as ITF and international shipping industry organizations, has developed and issued specific guidance and protocols to address health of seafarers in the pandemic and to carry out safe crew changes. We have been continuously urging action by governments at the political level on the crew change issue," an IMO spokesman says and adds:

"While IMO is encouraged by the progress made in many countries to designate seafarers as key workers and facilitate crew changes and repatriation, the organization remains very concerned about the many countries where restrictions are still in place for seafarers. There is much more to be done and IMO is continuing to work at the highest levels to raise awareness and call for further action by governments to address the crew change issue."