

Global crew changes paralysed by pandemic 'chaos'

Crew-nationality arbitrage emerges to give preference to 'easy-to-move' seafarers as shortages loom and coronavirus cases rise, with new strains defy testing protocols

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'Crew logistics has almost come to a halt, the challenges are intractable,' says leading shipmanager.



THE WORLD'S 1.5M SEAFARERS, AROUND 200,000 ARE ALREADY STRANDED ON SHIPS WITH EXPIRED CONTRACTS.

CREW changeovers vital for maintaining global seaborne trade are being left paralysed by a new wave of coronavirus restrictions, with most of the world's seafarers unable to leave vessels once contracts expire, or sign on to start their jobs.

Shipowners and operators report escalating changeover chaos and crew shortages as reimposed and ever-expanding quarantine and immigration restrictions bite at key hubs in the Philippines, Singapore, Hong Kong and the United Arab Emirates.

A crew-nationality arbitrage has also emerged, with preference being given to seafarers who are easier to relocate, such as the Chinese, to the detriment of Indian and other southeast Asian countries.

“The current situation for seafarers is beyond dire,” said Rajesh Unni from India-based shipmanager Synergy Marine Group, which provides technical management to some 375 ships. “We can’t enact crew changes almost anywhere in the world.

“If it’s not a lack of visas, it’s no flights. If there’s flights, they’re not to the right destinations.

“There are stipulations for vaccines, but limitations on which ones are accepted in which country and no solution as to how we give seafarers at sea vaccinations.

Singapore extends crew-change prohibitions to South Asian countries

Synergy chief executive Rajesh Unni says the humanitarian crisis brewing at sea calls for solidarity, co-ordination and decisive policy

“We are trying all the workarounds we can think of, but we have a stalemate that is worse than we had last year. Crew logistics has almost come to a halt. The challenges are intractable.”

Lloyd’s List has learned of numerous coronavirus infections on vessels as new strains defy testing protocols and are harder to detect via a seven-to-14-day offshore quarantines.

Governments have indicated times may be extended to 21 days, accelerating changeover difficulties.

Of the world’s 1.5 million seafarers, around 200,000 are already stranded on ships with expired contracts and numbers are rising rapidly, posing a significant threat to crew welfare.

“Crew shortages abound,” said Kishore Rajvanshy, managing director of Fleet Management, the world’s second-largest shipmanager which employs 12,000 Indian seafarers.

“From India and the Philippines, on account of anxious seafarers and countries banning flights from there, to China, where a ban on crew change for foreign nationals has meant that all newbuilding deliveries in this major shipbuilding country must be made using Chinese seafarers only.

“Everywhere else [there is a crew shortage] because other crew pools — from Sri Lanka to Ukraine and from Korea to Vietnam — have had to step up to make good this shortage created by India, the Philippines and China.”

Wages for Chinese seafarers have gained 10%, making ratings from the country more expensive than other nationalities, he told Lloyd’s List.

Adding to shortages is the political situation in Myanmar, which provides some 26,000 seafarers, based on UN data.

Lloyd's List was told that some crew from Myanmar working abroad had claimed political asylum in those countries. Others cannot enter or leave their home country. Relevant government agencies in Myanmar were not open to issue visas or work-related certificates, while many embassies were closed.

India's worsening health crisis triggers fresh crew-change challenge

About 30% of an estimated 80,000 Indian seafarers are stuck at home without an income as owners and managers work to extend existing contracts for those at sea

The rapidly deteriorating global crewing situation has increased lobbying to reprise government awareness and highlight urgency on establishing vaccination programmes.

“We’re working really hard with governments to try and ensure they understand the importance of seafarers being vaccinated, whether that’s through the International Labour Organization, the IMO or the United Nations or directly at government level,” said an International Chamber of Shipping spokesman.

“We’re seeing some governments get it and that’s to be applauded, but it needs some scale, so we’re continuing to work so that governments understand and include seafarers in their [vaccination] programmes.”

While 45 governments have granted seafarers ‘key worker’ status, many are among those countries that now refuse them international passage.

“The ideal situation the industry needs to work towards is one in which seafarers, regardless of nationality, feel safe and proud to undertake the important work that they do,” said Mr Rajvanshy.

“They can go back home if an emergency demands and have access to shore medical facilities should they need it — they do not feel imprisoned; they are recognised as key workers, provided fast access to vaccinations the world over, and can avail guaranteed crew change corridors, with dedicated quarantine centres, testing facilities, lodging and boarding.”