



International  
Chamber of Shipping  
Shaping the future of shipping



Mr António Guterres  
Secretary-General  
United Nations  
405 East, 42nd Street  
New York, NY, 10017  
United States of America - USA

*Via email: antonio.guterres@un.org*

21 May 2020

Dear Mr Guterres,

We write to you on behalf of the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS), whose member shipping companies operate over 80% of the world's merchant tonnage, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), representing around 250 million workers around the world, and the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), representing 20 million transport workers around the world.

There is an urgent humanitarian crisis facing the global shipping industry and the millions of workers who make it up. The global Covid-19 pandemic has created unprecedented and unexpected circumstances. Right now, tens of thousands of those seafarers are working for extended tours on ships, desperate and unable to be relieved by a crew change. This is because they are prevented by governments from returning via local ports, through transit nations, and/or to their home countries. Equally, relief crews are not being permitted to transit through nations to embark on these ships.

Under normal conditions, around 100,000 seafarers change over every month under international maritime regulations designed to protect seafarers' health, safety and welfare. Crew changes ensure that seafarers are returned home to their families and that new crew can take their place and continue the safe movement of goods. While regulatory organisations and unions have responsibly responded to requests from industry to extend seafarers' contracts twice to keep them on board, this is not a sustainable solution.

There are now over 200,000 seafarers onboard vessels worldwide who have completed their contractual tour of duty, but have been prevented from returning home. Many of these seafarers will be experiencing adverse effects on their mental health and reduced ability to safely perform their roles in the face of increasing fatigue. Additionally, stringent restrictions imposed by many countries, including denial of shore leave and access to essential medical assistance, is contributing to fatigue and exhaustion. We are concerned about suicide and self-harm amongst this vulnerable population of workers.

Government restrictions must be amended to allow for the replacement of tired seafarers with those who have been waiting to join ships, some for over three months now.

While there are some governments who are living up to their obligations and allowing the changes to take place such as by designating seafarers essential workers, there remains many who are preventing seafarers from returning home and being relieved through crew changes. These governments are flouting the UN conventions protecting the human rights of these seafarers. The State duty to protect human rights is built on the fundamental obligation of governments to protect rights-holders, which applies both under normal circumstances and at times of crisis. This is in line with the three pillars of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights - "Protect, Respect and Remedy". In discharging this duty, it is a critical task for governments to cooperate and ensure safe crew changes to avoid disaster.

To support a resolution to this emerging humanitarian crisis, the industry and unions have produced the *Recommended Framework of Protocols for Ensuring Safe Ship Crew Changes and Travel During the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic*. These protocols include:

- designating professional seafarers and marine personnel, regardless of nationality, as "key workers";
- the provision of practical and thorough guidance in respect of the existing maritime instruments, which most of the countries that today impose restrictions are signatory to; and
- the application of preventive measures in line with the World Health Organisation guidance.

**We urge the UN Secretary-General and the United Nations to urgently call for governments to ease restrictions and the exemptions necessary to ensure safe ship crew changes and travel during the Covid-19 pandemic, by supporting the implementation of these protocols.**

**To this end, we ask that the UN cooperate with *all* stakeholders to:**

- 1. Urgently bring this issue to the attention of "Heads of Government" so that this can be quickly addressed;**
- 2. Establish a global high-level task force with the involvement of relevant UN agencies and social partners to develop a sustainable strategy to implement the *Recommended Framework of Protocols for Ensuring Safe Ship Crew Changes and Travel During the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic*;**
- 3. Develop means of coordination amongst a number of stakeholders, including different ministries and agencies within national administrations, to ease travel restrictions and protect seafarers during this crisis;**
- 4. Urge member states to treat seafarers with the respect and dignity they deserve and provide them with the ability to continue to provide their vital services to the world.**

Both the IMO and the ILO are supportive of the maritime industry protocols and urged member states to consider giving effect to the recommendations. [ICS and IATA have also urged governments to facilitate the movement of international transport personnel and raised the issue with ICAO.](#)

Time is running out. We ask action be taken immediately, ahead of 16 June 2020 - the final agreed date to extend contracts for our seafarers.

There is a critical need for governments to address the serious problem of facilitating ships' crew changes. Without coordinated global action, the efficient flow of imports and exports carried by sea will be jeopardised, with negative impacts on the resilience of national economies throughout the Covid-19 crisis.

We thank you in advance for your attention to this important matter, and hope that the above is agreeable. We also recognise the international response and the leadership of the UN, through its specialised sister agencies, providing guidelines and direction, protecting human rights, upholding international law and safeguarding efforts to allow the uninterrupted delivery of essential goods needed to support the global logistics supply chain.

We are available for further conversations with you and your team. We look forward to receiving your response.

Respectfully,



Guy Platten  
Secretary General  
International Chamber of  
Shipping (ICS)



Sharan Burrow  
General Secretary  
International Trade Union  
Confederation (ITUC)



Stephen Cotton  
General Secretary  
International Transport  
Workers Federation (ITF)

CC:

Executive Office of the UN Secretary-General  
UN Working Group on Business & Human Rights  
International Labour Organization - ILO  
International Maritime Organization - IMO  
World Health Organization - WHO  
International Civil Aviation Organization - ICAO