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4 ALBERT EMBANKMENT  
LONDON SE1 7SR  
Telephone: +44 (0)20 7735 7611 Fax: +44 (0)20 7587 3210

Circular Letter No.4204/Add.29  
4 September 2020

To: All IMO Members  
United Nations and specialized agencies  
Intergovernmental organizations  
Non-governmental organizations in consultative status

Subject: **Coronavirus (COVID 19) – Communication from the Secretary-General regarding the crew change crisis**

Numerous forums around the world have recognized the importance of shipping in keeping the global supply chain open in order to respond to and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. A crucial component in keeping ships moving is the ability of shipowners and operators to safely conduct crew changes on ships.

Nearly 6 months have passed since COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, and the numerous restrictions and obstacles that prevent crew changes have created a humanitarian crisis at sea. According to estimates from the International Chamber of Shipping and the International Transport Workers Federation, more than 300,000 seafarers and marine personnel remain on board commercial vessels, unable to be repatriated and past the expiry of their contracts. In some cases, seafarers have been aboard their ships for more than 17 months, added to the challenges faced to get proper access to medical care and shore leave. A similar number of seafarers have been prevented from joining ships to change crews, creating a situation where they are unable to work. Despite these challenges, the seafarers on board ships have continued working, and the essential services seafarers have provided to the world have been nothing short of heroic.

The Organization has provided comprehensive guidance and protocols to the shipping industry and to Member Governments, through the Circular Letter No.4204 series, to allow crew changes to occur safely and securely. In addition, other United Nations agencies have highlighted the urgency of the matter, including in statements from the United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres. While significant progress has been made by many countries in allowing for crew changes for all seafarers, the rate of progress is not keeping pace with the backlog of ships requiring crew changes.

Seafarers cannot remain at sea indefinitely. In addition to the humanitarian crisis that has been caused by keeping seafarers effectively trapped on their vessels, the safety issues that arise from requiring overly fatigued and mentally exhausted seafarers to continue operating vessels

are a matter of great concern. If the crew change crisis is not resolved, ships will no longer be able to operate safely pursuant to the Organization's regulations and guidelines, further exacerbating the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The crew change crisis must be resolved at the soonest possible time. Doing so requires a whole of government approach, across multiple ministries. In that light, I reiterate my call to all Member States to:

1. Designate all seafarers and marine personnel (not only nationals) within their jurisdiction as key workers providing an essential service.
2. Implement the protocols and guidance in the Circular Letter No.4204 series and allow for safe and secure crew changes.
3. Remove other barriers to crew changes, such as visa restrictions, flight restrictions, national travel and movement restrictions, access to medical care and testing, etc.

Further, I request that Member States consider raising the issue of seafarers and the crew change crisis during the upcoming high-level week of the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly beginning on 22 September 2020. ILO, IMO and the UN Global Compact are organizing a side event during that week, to raise the visibility of the crew change crisis, most likely to take place on the World Maritime Day on 24 September.

Working together, this challenge to shipping and seafarers can be overcome. I pledge my best efforts and those of the IMO Secretariat in that regard.

Kitack Lim, Secretary-General

  

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