

MARITIME INSIGHT

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Trapped by COVID-19 – highlighting the plight of seafarers on board vessels

Introduction

The current COVID-19 pandemic has affected the shipping industry in many ways. Operations that usually occur as part of the standard routine of a ship are being severely disrupted, delayed or even cancelled. Examples include the delay in loading or unloading cargo, granting of permission for a ship to dock in port and, of course, crew changes. Many shipping organisations, not least the International Maritime Organization, have highlighted the importance of maintaining and facilitating the uninterrupted flow of maritime trade. The transportation of essential safety, food and medical supplies has rightly been cited as a clear reason to ensure that maritime trade continues without being disrupted.

What is less frequently highlighted is the plight of the seafarer on board. CHIRP Maritime has recently published two Insight articles concerning the medical and psychological impact on seafarers resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Insights may be found on our website publications page, entitled [COVID-19 General Medical Advice](#), and [Focus on Seafarer Wellbeing during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#).

Added to this is the fact that, with many countries now enforcing a lockdown, seafarers are unable to be repatriated – meaning there are hundreds of thousands of seafarers around the globe who are now effectively “trapped on board”. Some of these have completed their contractual tours of duty, which can be up to nine months long. The concern is beginning to be recognised in some quarters, but what is actually being done, and is it enough?

This is a global crisis, and seafarers should not be excluded from the international response

CHIRP Maritime believes that more could and should be done, and in line with major global maritime organisations we seek to ask questions of our industry to highlight these concerns. The problem of

seafarer repatriation can lead to serious medical and psychological issues which need to be recognised and addressed. We all know this is a global crisis and seafarers should not be excluded from the international response.

This Insight article seeks to further explore the difficulties that mariners are encountering during these extraordinary times. It suggests topics that shipping companies might consider in order to mitigate seafarers’ concerns, in particular contact with their families back home.

Background

In a recent [open letter](#) to United Nations agencies, the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) and the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF) wrote,

“Every month, around 100,000 seafarers need to be changed over from the ships which they operate in order to comply with relevant international maritime regulations governing safe working hours and crew welfare, so that they can continue to transport global trade safely.”

They went on to request that professional seafarers, whatever their nationality, be considered as key workers and therefore be “*treated with pragmatism and understanding when seeking to travel to and from their ships*”.

These issues were also highlighted in a [statement from the Special Tripartite Committee](#) of the Maritime Labour Convention 2006, as amended (MLC). The MLC clearly states that seafarers have the right to be repatriated at no cost to themselves, and also states a default period of a maximum service of 11 months. In addition the International Labour Organization has issued an [Information note on maritime labour issues and coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#).

Issues

Notwithstanding the admirable actions of the governmental and shipping organisations highlighted above, it is apparent that with very few exceptions crew changes are not being carried out – those that are require intricate planning and often complex

logistical solutions. Some of the issues being discussed include:

- the availability, or not, of air travel from the seafarer's home country to the port,
- entry restrictions to the country concerned,
- the possible need for quarantine on arrival (by air or by ship) in that country before joining a vessel or prior to being repatriated, and
- local travel restrictions that may hamper reaching the necessary port from the airport.

As an example of problems being experienced, Filipino crew arriving back in Manila are unable to leave the city to reach home on another island due to the current restrictions on movement within the metropolitan area of Manila. Equally, some other countries have forbidden any persons to enter, including their own citizens. Therefore, seafarers are often unable to enter their own country, leaving them stranded at the port of disembarkation or en-route. With travel advice and restrictions changing rapidly, it can be difficult to predict if and where issues will arise.

For seafarers trying to join ships this is a very difficult period. The need for prolonged journey times, possibly up to two weeks in quarantine before they can join a ship, and the continued uncertainty that they will get on board even after all of that, can lead to anxiety and stress. On the other hand, we know that many of the world's seafarers are not only the principal money earner for their immediate family but often the extended family as well. Not being able to go to sea as planned can cause all sorts of issues, particularly financial, and not every country has a social security mechanism that can assist.

For seafarers on board a ship approaching the end of their contract it is also an uncertain time. There are daily reports in the international press of ships denied permission to dock and even if they can come alongside, crew may not be able to disembark. Sometimes such permission is denied at the last moment leading to more uncertainty. If they can disembark and head home, they may also face travel restrictions and disruption as above, quite possibly leading to them spending long periods in an unfamiliar place, with no support network and restricted access to family and friends.

If a crew change is not possible due to any combination of the issues discussed, crew must stay on board and extend their contract. They may already have been at sea for many months and an extension can lead to all sorts of problems such as:

- Expiry of STCW certificates – many flag states have now arranged for certificates to be extended for a variable length of time and port state inspectors are understood to be adopting a pragmatic approach in this respect.
- Expiry of medical certificates - again most flag states have arranged for certificates to be extended. However, for seafarers on time-limited certificates, for example in order to receive scheduled tests for a known medical condition, this may mean that they cannot access planned medical care and may be at an increased risk of a medical event related to their underlying medical condition.
- Extension of period of service beyond 11 months. Whilst this may be necessary in extreme

cases due to the reasons outlined above, if a good opportunity to change crew was not utilised, then this should be questioned by the appropriate authorities.

- Fatigue among seafarers may be associated with a decrease in efficiency, potential lack of concentration, and consequently an increased risk of accidents
- Demoralized crew who refuse to extend their contracts, but still have to stay on board because they are not able to disembark anywhere. There are examples of crew who are so actively opposed to being on board that their opposition destabilizes the general well-being of other crew members.
- Psychological issues such as anxiety, depression, lack of motivation and potential to harm themselves or others.
- Running out of regular medication, which is very difficult to obtain given the restrictions of access to shoreside services.
- Difficulty in accessing shoreside medical care for any medical issue, due to the restrictions described. Suddenly, treatment of a toothache or investigation and treatment of chest or abdominal pain become logistically challenging and seafarers may not be able to access shoreside facilities for optimal care. Medevac options are limited, and crew may need to be managed on board rather than being transferred ashore.
- Increasing concern amongst crew on board for family and friends at home, and the strong desire to be with them in these strange times.

It should be noted that if a ship has been at sea with no contact with others for 14 days or more and all on board are well, it is highly unlikely that anybody on board will develop COVID-19. Crew joining the ship may introduce the virus and this uncertainty can cause stress and anxiety amongst the crew.

Ensuring the health and wellbeing of mariners

CHIRP Maritime accepts that whilst many countries and ports remain in a lock down situation, the above issues will remain unresolved until such time as restrictions are lifted. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the mariner should be neglected. Some companies have suspended all crew changes until such time as travel restrictions are lifted, and it is fair to say that some unscrupulous shipping operators will quite simply wash their hands of the whole affair and take little interest in the health and wellbeing of the mariners on board their vessels, CHIRP Maritime does not believe that the more responsible companies are taking that view but what, in fact, is being done to assist seafarers in this respect?

What in fact is being done to assist seafarers?

There are plenty of areas where companies might consider the wellbeing, health and safety of crews which are currently "trapped on board". These include, but are not limited to:

- Regular updates from the company with information about the current status of the



Mariners – staying safe to ensure that essential trade is maintained
(Photo courtesy of Grieg Star Shipping – acknowledged with thanks)

pandemic particularly focused on information from the seafarers' home countries,

- Access for seafarers to make regular contact with their families by telephone, social media, or perhaps company email if a specific crew mail system is not installed on board,
- Similar information and assistance from manning agencies should be the norm and not the exception
- Shore leave in many ports is currently banned or severely restricted. Thus, if the vessel does not have a slop chest, companies could instruct their masters to see which crew members need essential toiletries and perhaps medication, then instruct the vessels agents to order and supply,
- Where seafarers have an urgent financial requirement then this should be treated in a pragmatic, compassionate, and urgent manner by shipping companies,
- Perhaps a financial incentive such as an additional bonus and/or increased leave,
- A reduction in hours worked to allow for more relaxation, and
- A guarantee of future employment on completion of leave would give the seafarer some reassurance.

In addition, CHIRP has recently become aware of a European Commission initiative which will designate “fast track” ports in order to alleviate the crew change issues brought about by travel

restrictions during the coronavirus epidemic.

Member states are being requested to create a network of ports to facilitate and expedite crew changes and the Commission has issued guidelines related to health, repatriation and travel. Further information may be found here .

This initiative, and others where countries, e.g. Singapore, are reportedly starting to permit crew changes, albeit with restrictions imposed, are to be applauded and CHIRP trusts that they will rapidly bear fruit.

Summary

In summary, these are difficult times. Both the health and wellbeing of crew currently on board, and well-planned crew changes are essential to the safe and efficient running of the ship. Where operators are planning to change crew, a full risk assessment must be carried out. This includes but is not limited to:

- International travel restrictions
- Restrictions to entering certain countries and gaining the appropriate visa to do so
- The potential need for quarantine on arrival in a country
- Issues affecting travel in a country, obtaining hotel rooms etc.
- The length of time crews have been on board, their experience and skill set and how effective they are as they approach the end of their contract
- Any medical or psychological issues of crew on board that necessitate them leaving the ship as planned

With respect to the wellbeing of crews who are understandably concerned about their families back home, shipping companies should adopt a pragmatic approach, and assist all mariners as far as they are able to do so.

The current global crisis is a people issue – our people. In the meantime, it is essential that we all work together to ensure that seafarers are not neglected or forgotten about, and that they are treated as key workers. Everything possible should be done to ensure the health and wellbeing of seafarers currently on board and, when possible, to facilitate necessary changes of crew to keep the world’s supply lines open. There is after all an H in HSE. The vital aspects of medical, psychological and general seafarer wellbeing require the attention of all parties at this critical time.

The current global crisis is a people issue – our people. It is essential that we all work together to ensure that the health and wellbeing of seafarers on board is maintained