

Media Release – 27 July 2020

“Crew change: Drastic measures needed now”

INTERCARGO cannot even begin to contemplate the impacts if terminal and cargo operations were halted and cargo vessels stopped operations and trading, as a result of crew remaining on board for 12 to 17 months. This compromises the safety of crew, ships, and cargoes, if worldwide progress is not made on crew change. About 300,000 seafarers remain trapped on board their ships and a similar number are awaiting re-employment with financial hardship.

Despite a universal campaign from all sectors of the shipping industry, INTERCARGO says that hundreds of thousands of seafarers still continue serving after completing their Seafarer Employment Agreement (SEA), and that many of them have now spent well over 12 months on board. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that bulk carriers on tramp trading call at many more ports than other shipping sectors do, piling added strain on an already fatigued workforce with no hope of crew change.

“Very soon the industry is going to have to say enough is enough,” says Dimitris Fafalios, Chairman of INTERCARGO. “The situation is reaching farcical proportions. We have seen crew changes refused because a COVID test could not be carried out within the prescribed 48-hour window before the crew’s arrival, despite the journey to the port taking three days. In some other countries which claim to allow crew change, in fact this happens only if crew can be replaced with the country’s nationals. These are just some examples.”

The two key bottlenecks are the airlines unwillingness to make flights available between shipping destinations and crew source countries; and the lack of commitment from Health & Immigration Authorities to facilitate seafarers’ travelling and issuance of visas.

As per Jay K. Pillai, Vice-Chairman of INTERCARGO, “the situation is escalating from bad to worse as the United Nations IMO protocols for Key Workers are not being honoured by all Port States. About 35 to 40% of all seafarers on board cargo ships are serving well over their SEA and about 10% of all seafarers on board are serving between 12 to 17 months. This is inhumane and countries should bear full responsibility for it. Some Governments are not facilitating the crew change even for their own citizens. This includes imposing all possible restrictions on crew change in their home country, restricting flights and applying policies which do not allow seafarers to fly to foreign countries to join ships. It’s a sad story and it can’t continue like this unless Port States who export/import cargoes ensure that ships will not depart with seafarers serving over the MLC limit. More and more countries are prohibiting crew change, though they welcome the cargoes the ships bring to support the welfare of their society.”

INTERCARGO believes that the focus of attention should be on following measures:

- INTERCARGO supports the cross-industry recommended framework of protocols for ensuring safe ship crew changes and travel during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and places great emphasis on accurate testing procedures, especially for on-signing crew. Recent occurrences of Covid-19 positive crew being allowed to travel from their home countries cannot be condoned by INTERCARGO as it puts seafarers on board and civilians at risk. INTERCARGO calls for increased diligence by crewing agents arranging on-signing crew so that this does not happen again.

- Seafarers shall be tested prior to departure from their home country and tested again at arrival to port prior to going on board ship. Similarly, seafarers disembarking from ships shall be tested prior to coming ashore or flying out. If tests are negative, they shall be exonerated from quarantine.
- All seafarers shall be allowed to travel with visa exemptions for joining ships.
- Port States must allow seafarers to sign off without confirmed flight tickets and wait in isolation hotels while awaiting flights, which could be long, subject to availability of flights.

INTERCARGO fully supports the outcome of the International Maritime Summit on Crew Change earlier in July, where thirteen countries signed agreements to facilitate crew changes. INTERCARGO encourages all governments that are signatories to the IMO SOLAS convention to join and implement the above agreement and especially countries which benefit most from the import and export of dry bulk cargoes.

INTERCARGO would like to remind the airline industry of the great economic support provided through seafarer, superintendent, specialist technician and surveyor travel to and from ships before the Covid-19 crisis. Hundreds of thousands or even more than a million tickets annually provided a significant economic boost to airlines globally. INTERCARGO reminds airlines not to forget seafarers during these difficult times.

Spyros Tarasis, Vice-Chairman of INTERCARGO sums up, saying: “This has become a talking shop. Everybody knows where the problems lie – with the airlines, with visas and with health authorities not recognising seafarers as key workers. But nothing is being done, and very soon the shipping industry itself may well be obliged/forced to stop the trading of cargoes essential for welfare and sustaining the smooth running of societies worldwide.”

ENDS

About INTERCARGO: International shipping is vital for the global economy and prosperity as it transports approximately 90% of world trade. The dry bulk sector is the largest shipping sector in terms of number of ships and deadweight. Dry bulk carriers account for 43% of the world fleet (in tonnage) and sail an estimated 55% of the global transport work.

The International Association of Dry Cargo Shipowners (INTERCARGO) is representing the interests of quality dry bulk shipowners, with close to 2,400 registered ships out of more than 11,000 ships in the global dry bulk fleet, corresponding to over 25% of the global dry bulk fleet basis deadweight. INTERCARGO convened for the first time in 1980 in London and has been participating with consultative status at the International Maritime Organization (IMO) since 1993. INTERCARGO provides the forum where dry bulk shipowners, managers and operators are informed about, discuss and share concerns on key topics and regulatory challenges, especially in relation to safety, the environment and operational excellence. The Association takes forward its Members’ positions to the IMO, as well as to other shipping and international industry fora, having free and fair competition as a principle.