

THE HINDU BusinessLine

Crew change on ships face challenges as Omicron induce fresh restrictions



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Restrictions imposed by some countries to deal with the spread of the Omicron variant of COVID-19, first detected in South Africa, is making the global shipping industry jittery, specially when it was slowly emerging from the challenges in changing crew on board since the outbreak of the pandemic about 18 months ago.

Singapore has banned the entry of vessels from Africa. Meanwhile, Hong Kong has listed 44 countries as high-risk, which make it impossible to undertake crew change on ships coming from these nations prior to 21 days or less, before arrival at Hong Kong.

India has ordered passengers coming from 'at risk' countries to undergo RT-PCR testing on arrival at the airport besides compulsory institutional quarantine for one week.

The countries that are designated 'at risk' include European countries, the UK, South Africa, Brazil, Bangladesh, Botswana, China, Mauritius, New Zealand, Zimbabwe, Singapore, Israel, and Hong Kong.

The Maharashtra government has instructed domestic airlines not to board any passenger for landing in Mumbai without RT PCR test with negative result taken within 72 hours of departure.

“This will create problems for seafarers coming to Mumbai for onward travel to global crew change hubs,” said a shipping company executive.

“Effecting crew change is still very challenging; that hasn’t changed in the last 18 months. This will make it harder,” the executive said.

Ship managers such as Captain Rajesh Unni, Founder and CEO at Singapore-based Synergy Group, says that the travel restrictions being implemented in response to the Omicron variant “are nothing short of deeply alarming”.

“They are already adversely impacting crew changeovers and we are concerned that, once again, seafarers will be the victims,” he said.

Flights are being cancelled leading to reduced availability of seats while visa regimes and quarantine periods are being significantly tightened.

“Some of our seafarers who signed off in South Africa, for example, are finding it very difficult to even find flights. In one instance, crew were turned back from an airport in South Africa. They were devastated - they were looking forward to going home after having spent months on board, without shore leave in most cases,” Unni said.

“Given that we’ve already had a humanitarian crisis at sea in 2020, by now systems should be in place globally to enable smooth crew changes, priority air travel, immediate medical assistance and rapid repatriation,” he noted.

“There should be global recognition that seafarers are key workers. And they should have access to green channels to enable them to work and return home so they can keep world trade moving. Yet still we have no legal framework for this, either to cope now or in future when new ‘variants of concern’ emerge, or we’re faced with the next pandemic. We also have a patchwork of vaccine recognition rules that make very little sense,” he added.