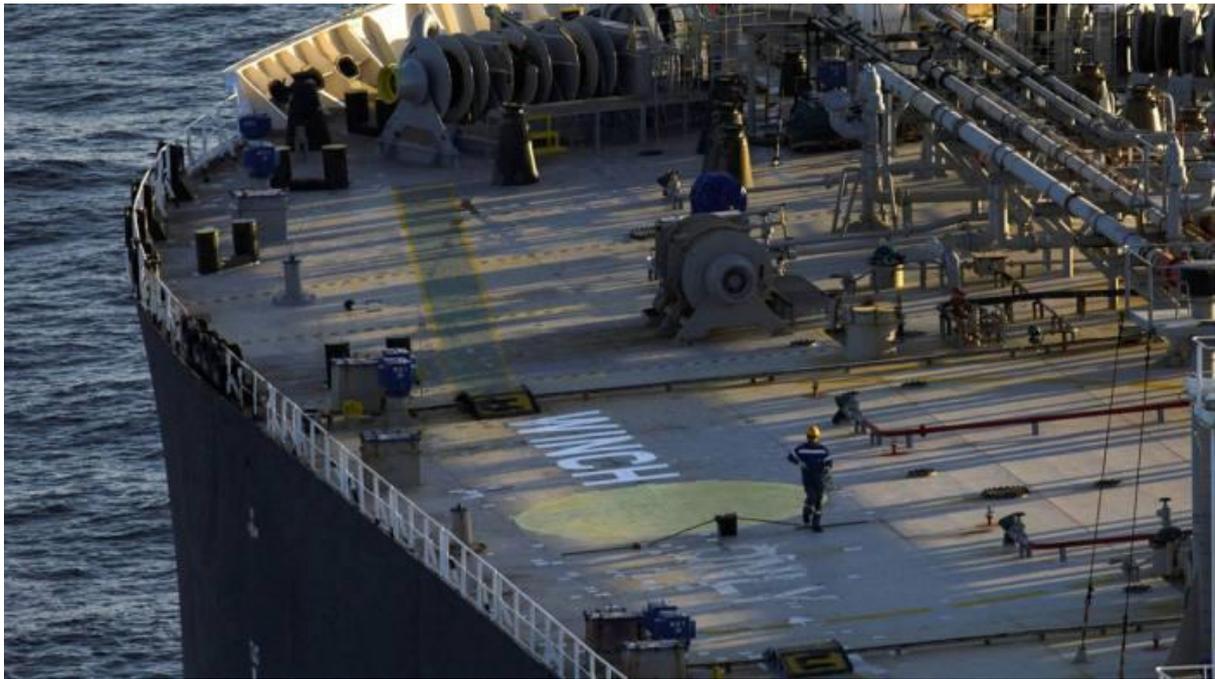


The seafarers left stranded by the pandemic

Maritime workers have kept the global economy afloat – often at the expense of their own welfare



An oil tanker anchored in the Pacific Ocean. Few professions have felt the pressures of the coronavirus crisis quite as acutely as seafarers © Bloomberg

Claire Jones | 5th July 2021

For Raj, a captain from India, the impact of the pandemic first hit home when he was on the other side of the world. In March 2020, as he prepared to take charge of oil tanker the Blue Butterfly in Quintero, Chile, the government there announced a blanket ban on disembarkation. That meant the master he was due to replace had to remain on board.

“We sailed to the US, then to Europe. It was only two-and-a-half months later, when we arrived in Hamburg, that he was allowed off the ship,” Raj said.

Few professions have felt the pressures of the crisis as acutely as seafarers — and as many areas of life edge back towards pre-pandemic norms, the shipping industry is still struggling.

While the numbers affected have fallen, as of March this year, 200,000 seafarers still remained on board commercial vessels, unable to be repatriated and past the expiry of their contracts, according to estimates by the International Maritime Organization.

At any given time, about 1m people are working on cargo vessels around the world. The vessels they command play a vital role in supplying medical equipment and ensuring the world continues to eat and remain entertained during lockdowns. But since the pandemic hit, governments have often left crew stranded, forced to spend far longer on vessels without shore leave than international labour rules allow.

While maritime law in theory applies internationally, care has been inconsistent. “Seafarers are key workers but their treatment during the pandemic, be it their wellbeing, vaccination or relief, has really depended on individual governments and the many maritime regulators,” said Rajesh Unni, chief executive of Synergy Marine Group, which provides ship management services and employs Raj.

“Our company tries to help, but some countries just have blanket bans [on disembarkation],” said Raj, master of a 22-strong crew. “One colleague was left on board for almost 14 months.”

The usual stint is six months and the maximum agreed by the International Labour Organization is 11 months. “The US, the UK and Canada have treated seafarers like human beings. Others, though, especially some of those close to the Black Sea, have not — they act like you are pollution and they don’t want any contamination,” Raj said.

Raymond, a captain from the Philippines who has worked on some of the world’s largest bulk carriers and container ships, recalls the strain as he waited months to board a vessel he was supposed to take charge of in March 2020. “My savings depleted and the bills piled up. I was a bit worried because of the uncertainty.”

When he finally joined the ship — in Port Said, Egypt — last August, he found a burnt-out crew. “The captain I took over from was on for almost six months more than he should have been, that’s almost double his contract. It

must have affected his wellbeing . . . When you are a captain, even when you are resting, you feel like you are working, you have to be constantly thinking about the ship.”

Speaking to family and friends back home had been essential in alleviating the strain, said Catherine Spencer, chief executive of the Seafarers’ Charity. “The conditions seafarers have faced during the pandemic have really affected mental health. One of the stress factors is clearly not being able to always communicate when you’re at sea.”

In response, last month Synergy, along with Philippine Transmarine Carriers, another shipping management company, and Inmarsat, which provides maritime communication technology, launched WeTeam, a free round-the-clock hotline with counsellors available in 14 languages. “The technology to have better communication on ships is there. It’s just that some shipping lines are better than others in providing it,” said Ronald Spithout, president at Inmarsat Maritime.

Raj said counselling proved valuable when the mental health of a member of his crew deteriorated. “The officer was having some problems with his girlfriend, and it was becoming a very difficult situation due to the pandemic. This was the first time I had experience of this, I was not sure what to do. I called the hotline, I described his behaviour, and they spoke to him and were very helpful . . . It calmed down from that moment on, and he was able to disembark in India and return home.”

While Raj thinks there are downsides to more communication on board — unlimited access to the internet, provided by Synergy free of charge during the pandemic, left some crew turning up for shifts tired — he and Raymond agree that being able to keep in contact with loved ones has been vital. “As a captain you should be aware of emotional and mental wellbeing. But most Filipinos are not that comfortable with opening up and sharing our feelings,” said Raymond. “You have to make sure they have constant access to communication so they can go and check in on their family.”

It was also important to create a greater sense of togetherness among his crew of mostly Filipino and Vietnamese sailors, Raymond added. “When I first came on board, after having their meal, people would go straight to their cabins . . . What I did was to organise some events to promote camaraderie.” That included karaoke, barbecues and sports games.

Raj agreed: “It was essential to get people out of cabins on their own and spending time eating together, in the smoke room, playing table tennis.”

When crew disembark, quarantine conditions vary. Raymond had a mandatory seven-day stay in a hotel in the Philippines; while conditions were fine for him, he had heard others complain.

Some governments count seafarers as key workers, giving them priority in vaccination drives. India has reduced the time between first and second shots for seafarers from 84 to 28 days, Raj said. The Philippines, a country that supplies an outsized share of the world’s seafarers, has also said that crew will be among those first in line to receive vaccinations and that they should be prioritised for shots such as Moderna and BioNTech/Pfizer, which are more widely recognised internationally.

But it is a mixed bag. “European nations, with their excessive [vaccine] supply, need to take a firmer lead in vaccinating their non-native seafarers, who in reality are the ones to deliver the very cargoes on which they depend,” said Unni.

Seafarers are peeved that media coverage of events such as the Suez Canal blockage this year focused on the impact on supply chains rather than the lives of those responsible for transporting more than 80 per cent of the world’s goods by volume. They want greater public recognition.

“This is one of the most noble professions. Just imagine if the maritime industry stopped operating, even for a couple of hours, the world as we know it would stop,” said Raymond. “It’s about time people realise how essential seafarers are.”