



Chartered flights see crew changes take off

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Crew changes are beginning to filter in with two weeks to go until the final deadline set by seafarer unions comes into effect.

Chartered flights are now operating out of India, principally via Doha as well as Colombo, to take seafarers to ships around the world while in the Philippines, which today came out of one of the world's longest and most strict lockdowns, flights are being made from the capital to Europe's largest port, Rotterdam, via a so-called safe transit corridor.

More than 200,000 seafarers are working at sea beyond their original contract lengths with many now onboard for more than a year, thanks to the travel restrictions put in place across the globe in the wake of the spread of coronavirus.

A SpiceJet plane took off from Mumbai on Sunday evening for Doha, carrying 63 seafarers (pictured) from six companies – Maersk Tankers, Mediterranean Shipping Company, BW Group, Synergy Marine, Nautilus Shipping and MMSI. From Doha, the crew have flown out to different destinations to join ships.

Many more flights are now booked as New Delhi has finally eased rules for chartered flights.

Doha and Colombo have been designated the hub airports through which Indian seafarers will be sent to join ships or repatriated after signing off from ships.

Colombo has agreed to allow Indian seafarers to stay for five days if they are travelling to Colombo to join a ship, and seven days if they are travelling out of Colombo on a chartered flight, provided flights are confirmed.

Qatar, meanwhile, has permitted seafarers a 22-hour stay at the airport while waiting for onward connections.

Also completed over the weekend was a pilot project flight taking crew from Manila to Rotterdam. The project was backed by Wilhelmsen, V. Ships, Synergy, Magsaysay, Global Marine Travel, the PTC Group and Inchcape. The safe transit corridor was described on social media by Synergy founder Rajesh Unni as the “new normal” for crew changes.

“We must adopt consistent methodology for safe changeovers,” Unni wrote on Twitter on Saturday. The end-to-end transit process delivering crew from the world’s top seafaring hub included medicals, coronavirus tests, biosecure lodging and land and air transit.

The UN secretary-general was urged on May 22 by shipping and trade unions leaders to persuade his 193 member states to act urgently to avoid a “humanitarian crisis”, with over 200,000 seafarers currently stuck working on vessels across the globe and unable to be relieved of their duties.

In a joint letter to António Guterres, the leaders of the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS), International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF), urged the secretary-general to ensure governments were adopting the 12-step set of protocols issued by the UN’s own maritime regulator, the International Maritime Organization.

The letter states: “There are now over 200,000 seafarers onboard vessels worldwide who have completed their contractual tour of duty, but have been prevented from returning home. Many of these seafarers will be experiencing adverse effects on their mental health and reduced ability to safely perform their roles in the face of increasing fatigue.

“Additionally, stringent restrictions imposed by many countries, including denial of shore leave and access to essential medical assistance, is contributing to fatigue and exhaustion. We are concerned about suicide and self-harm amongst this vulnerable population of workers.”

The letter highlights the responsibility of governments to adhere to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

“Time is running out. We ask action be taken immediately, ahead of 16 June 2020 – the final agreed deadline to implement crew changes for our seafarers,” the letter states.

In related news, the Maritime and Port Authority (MPA) of Singapore has, setting out a way for crew changes to take place in the busy shipping hub for seafarers who have worked beyond their contracts.

Two weeks ago employers and seafarer trade unions agreed one final month's extension before crews working beyond their stipulated contracts must be repatriated. The deal means governments have until June 16 to resolve the crew change issue.

In a joint statement from the International Transport Workers Federation and the International Maritime Employers' Council (IMEC) last month, the two bodies warned failure to abide by the mid-June deadline could "negatively impact on the commercial viability" of ship operations.