

# Global industry joins forces to help resolve humanitarian crisis at sea

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**Signees of the Neptune Declaration warn global leaders that ignoring the risk to crews' well-being threatens maritime supply chains, which carry 90% of global trade**

Top global industry leaders have signed the 'Neptune Declaration on Seafarer Wellbeing and Crew Change' in a worldwide call to action to end the unprecedented crew change crisis caused by Covid-19.

The more than 300 signatories to the 'Neptune Declaration' include A.P. Møller - Mærsk, BP, BW, Cargill, COSCO, DOW, Euronav, MISC, NYK, Rio Tinto, Shell, Trafigura, Unilever and Vale.

The Neptune Declaration defines four key actions to facilitate crew changes and keep global supply chains functioning including recognising seafarers as key workers and giving them priority access to Covid-19 vaccines, establishing and implementing gold standard health protocols based on existing best practice, increasing collaboration between ship operators and charterers to facilitate crew changes and ensuring air connectivity between key maritime hubs for seafarers.

## **Critical situation**

Hundreds of thousands of seafarers from across the globe have been left stranded working aboard ships beyond the expiry of their initial contracts and are unable to be relieved since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

Fatigue after long periods at sea has significant consequences on the physical and mental well-being of seafarers.

It also increases the risk of maritime incidents and environmental disasters and poses a threat to the integrity of maritime supply chains, which carry 90 per cent of global trade.

Despite significant efforts by international organisations, unions, companies and some governments to resolve the untenable crew change crisis, the situation is getting worse as governments bring in more travel bans in response to the new strains of the Covid-19 virus.

A number of key issues leave this critical situation unresolved: national authorities around the world continue to see crew changes and international travel as a Covid-19 risk; high-quality health protocols are not being consistently implemented by ship operators; and the disruption of international air travel has reduced the number of flights between traditional crew change hubs and major seafaring nations.

“Travel restrictions, despite the numerous efforts to ease them, have taken a devastating toll on the physical and mental well-being of the world’s seafarers,” says Rajesh Unni, CEO, Synergy Group, one of the signatories to the Neptune Declaration.

A majority of seafarers onboard are still unsure on when they might return home even as they continue altruistically to play a critical role in the vaccine and PPE supply chains.

“It’s a cruel paradox that is leaving their families in a constant state of despair and worry about their loved ones. The fact that many countries are still not giving the seafarers their deserved recognition is unacceptable. It is our collective responsibility to have all seafarers be truly recognized and treated as key workers with vaccinations a priority and travel restrictions lifted for them immediately,” Unni said.

## **Shared responsibility**

The signatories to the 'Neptune Declaration' recognise that they have a shared responsibility based on their roles across the entire maritime value chain, and beyond, to ensure that the crew change crisis is resolved as soon as possible.

On Monday, the Director General of Shipping amended its November order allowing sign-on and sign-off of foreign crew at Indian ports due to the continuing restrictions on crew change at different ports around the world.

“Sign-on, sign-off of foreign crew at outer anchorage (of Indian ports) shall be allowed without any restriction only after obtaining prior clearance from Foreigners Regional Registration Office (FRRO) concerned,” DG Shipping Amitabh Kumar said in an order.

“This will be only a temporary measure during the period when specific protocols are in place due to Covid-19 pandemic. Once Covid-19 pandemic protocols are removed, sign-on/sign-off procedure at outer anchorage should revert to the provisions as prescribed in the Visa Manual 2019,” he said.