

Call for global system of safe corridors for ship crew change

August 24, 2020

Issue allowed to morph into a humanitarian crisis: Capt Rajesh Unni

International shipping accounts for around 90 per cent of world trade, according to latest figures from the International Chamber of Shipping. This means we all rely on shipping to deliver the goods and products on which we depend – from energy to food to manufactured goods to cement. Maritime transport is the engine of globalisation.

Seafarers, therefore, are absolutely critical to modern life in this globalised world, says Capt Rajesh Unni, Founder and CEO, Synergy Marine Group, one of the world's leading shipmanagers whose diverse fleet of more than 300 vessels includes some of the industry's most sophisticated vessels.

It is a hard job in a difficult environment which involves spending long periods separated from the loved ones, Capt Unni told *BusinessLine* in an interview.

“This (job) is not for everyone, and those that take up this challenge tend to be stoic but adventurous types willing to take on difficult tasks in harsh conditions,” says Capt Unni. Excerpts:

Does unrest among seafarers in any way pose a threat to maintaining the global supply chain?

They (seafarers) are used to adversity. However, what has happened since the Covid-19 lockdowns began in the first quarter of this year has been far beyond ‘adversity.’

This is not about seafarer ‘unrest’. This is about treating people – key workers who keep the world trade flowing – with the respect they deserve and doing the right thing morally. Seafarers should not have to carry the burden of global lockdowns and global trade as they have been. It is not fair on them or their families.

The crew change crisis started out as a major logistics challenge and that should have been addressed early on. Instead, it was allowed to become a humanitarian crisis and a threat to the safety of shipping and the mental health and general wellness of seafarers.

What are the practical solutions to facilitate crew change? Is extension of their Employment Agreements advisable?

Extended tenures without a fixed time frame or opened-ended contracts of any type are not a solution for seafarers or for shipping. We need a crew change system that future-proofs world trade against further Covid-19 lockdowns or other pandemics, whilst also safeguarding the human rights of seafarers.

This means we have to put in place cross-border legislation and regulations that recognise seafarers as key workers.

And, we need governments to collaborate to establish a global system of safe corridors that enable crew changes immune to the ravages of viruses such as we face now.

This problem needs to be approached from a seafarer welfare perspective. And we need to find a long-term solution to this now, not in the midst of the next crisis.

Do physically and mentally fatigued crew on board pose a threat to safe and secure voyage?

Anything that impacts seafarer wellness and mental and physical health is a threat to the safety at sea, and therefore, the viability of world trade. And, this coronavirus-induced crew changeover crisis has had a clear and measurable negative impact on seafarers.

At Synergy, we were treating seafarer mental wellness with the gravity and seriousness it deserves long before this pandemic, when we collaborated with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences for setting up a free multi-lingual counselling helpline for the global seafaring workforce, and run by trained and qualified counsellors. In view of the worrying increase in the number of calls, we added another counsellor earlier this year.

Coming to the question of ships coming to a standstill, you cannot keep working people indefinitely. Some have been on extended tours of duty for almost 15 months now. The longer this issue goes on, the greater risk to the supply chain.

Not only is this a pressing humanitarian issue, but the smooth operation of the global merchant fleet is critical to the recovery of the world economy, from this awful pandemic.

There's a view that shipping companies and employers too must share a part of the blame for the crisis...

Through all this, shipping, for the most part, has been at the mercy of forces beyond its control. Since the start of lockdowns, the rules for crew changes have been subject to constantly changing pressures in every country. This made planning in advance – the most efficient means of conducting changeovers – almost impossible.

We were simply unable to get people on and off ships. The ports and airports were closed. Or there were no flights or visas.

Or quarantine periods rendered coordination impossible. Or the rules changed. Or local bureaucrats were unclear about the rules and didn't apply them. It has been chaos. Some countries were almost entirely shut down, even when their own nationals were trying to return home after months at sea.

I think shipping as an industry stepped up to the plate. We were unified in applying pressure and drawing political attention to the fact that we needed help. The Government of India was one of the first to take decisive action and we have all been very thankful for that. This has meant Indian seafarers have fared far better than those from many other countries.

But crew changes are still barely possible in many parts of the world. Across the industry, we are all still clearing vast backlogs of crew trying to get home and replacing them with those who want to return to employment but who have not been able to reach ships, often for months on end.

This crisis is not over. Shipping still needs help from decision makers to ensure the crisis does not deteriorate again later in the year, especially as we have seen more breakouts of Covid-19 and yet more lockdowns.

Have you approached ICAO/IATA to discuss the option of resuming flights to facilitate crew change?

One of the big challenges in this crisis was the closure of air lanes early. At Synergy, we reached out to individual airlines as well as IATA in tandem with ICS to try and find solutions.

The airline industry came on board with our creation of safe corridors for seafarers from ship to airport quite early on, which was a big help. That helped get crew changeovers moving and has become a blueprint ever since. We continue to work with carriers and their various associations to alleviate the stresses on seafarers.

Of course, the airlines have faced huge problems from lockdowns themselves and it has not been their fault that flights have not always been available. Many simply could not fly. They couldn't always get permits. And passengers, for prolonged periods in many parts of the world, were not able to fly.

Sometimes even when we were trying to charter our own aircraft, the logistics crunch was not in the skies; it was at the port, or it was due to the lack of visas, or the slowness of response due to embassy closures, or a lack of clarity over quarantine periods; or closure of roads and railways prevented people getting to the port or the airport.

How are maritime nations responding to the crisis?

It's a mixed bag. India, though, has responded better than most, and for that we are grateful.