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Circular Letter No.4204/Add.39  
7 May 2021

To: All IMO Members  
United Nations and specialized agencies  
Intergovernmental organizations  
Non-governmental organizations in consultative status

Subject: **Coronavirus (COVID-19) – Communication from the Secretary-General regarding the crew change crisis**

Nearly 16 months have passed since the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak was declared a pandemic by WHO and during this time the international community has experienced an unprecedented crisis in international shipping. To slow the spread of the disease and mitigate its impact, national and international travel was curtailed and borders were closed, severely negatively impacting this intensely interconnected world.

On 31 January 2020, IMO issued its first communication concerning the pandemic, providing information and guidance to minimize risks to seafarers, passengers and others on board ships. Since then, a substantial number of communications, some regularly updated, have been issued through the Circular Letter No.4204 series, addressing a variety of matters with the aim of minimizing the impact of the pandemic on international shipping by providing comprehensive guidance and recommendations to Member States and the shipping community.

Throughout the pandemic, shipping has demonstrated its reliability and resilience as one of the most economic and effective modes of transport and consequently international supply chains did not experience significant interruptions. I would like to express my deep appreciation for the tremendous efforts of Member States and the maritime industry to maintain the flow of goods across the globe during these difficult times.

The life and work of seafarers have been affected dramatically by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the last quarter of 2020, the estimated number of seafarers globally waiting to either be relieved or join their ships stood at 400,000. Now, in May 2021, thanks to the collaborative efforts of Member States, the shipping industry, social partners and our sister UN agencies, the number is currently estimated to be about 200,000. However, this figure is still unacceptably high and the humanitarian crisis at sea is by no means over. Seafarers still face enormous challenges concerning repatriation, travelling to join their ships, proper access to medical care and shore leave. Despite these challenges, the seafarers on board ships have continued working, providing an essential service for the global population.

The prioritization of the COVID-19 vaccination for seafarers is a new challenge for the international community and IMO is working actively within the United Nations system and with Member States and the maritime industry to find solutions to enable and accelerate the vaccination of seafarers, in order to protect them as soon as possible and to facilitate their safe movement across borders.

Some key maritime labour supply countries are reliant on the COVAX initiative of WHO. To ensure access to vaccines of those countries, I call on all IMO Member States to work together towards a fair global distribution, beyond fulfilling their national needs. No seafarers should be left behind or forced to forgo their careers because of limited resources in their home country. The health of the world's seafarers and the safety of their workplaces has to remain one of our main priorities and can only be guaranteed if industry and Member States continue to provide all necessary measures such as testing, appropriate PPE, access to medical care and sanitation facilities to prevent the spread of the virus.

We cannot afford to be complacent when it comes to addressing the ongoing humanitarian crisis at sea. I therefore reiterate my call to all Member States to designate all seafarers and marine personnel as "key workers" providing an essential service. To date, only 58 of our 174 Members have notified me that they have done so. The designation of seafarers as "key workers" will facilitate their access to the vaccination, since most States are prioritizing essential workers in their national COVID-19 vaccination programmes, in accordance with the WHO SAGE Roadmap.\*

I remain confident that by working together we will eventually overcome this difficult and challenging situation for global shipping. Rest assured that this Organization will continue to do all it can to assist the maritime community and in particular our seafarers.

Kitack Lim, Secretary-General

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\* WHO SAGE Roadmap For Prioritizing Uses Of COVID-19 Vaccines In The Context Of Limited Supply: <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/who-sage-roadmap-for-prioritizing-uses-of-covid-19-vaccines-in-the-context-of-limited-supply>