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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.

