



Brussels, 17.07.2020

To: Mme Sophie Wilmès, Prime Minister of Belgium

Subject: Crew changes in Covid-19 times – Save our Seafarers, call for action

Dear Mme Wilmès, Dear Prime Minister,

We, the European and International social partners for maritime transport together with our maritime partners, would like to call upon you to show political leadership and commitment to the welfare of seafarers.

We appreciate the efforts of the Belgian authorities, but still more needs to be done to relieve seafarers and facilitate crew changes. These are currently only taking place at an estimated level of 30% of what is needed. Seafarers are playing an essential role in maintaining the global flow of energy, food, medicines and medical supplies by ship. Many seafarers have been away from home for months, unable to leave their ships and return home because of travel restrictions imposed by governments. Meanwhile seafarers who have been rostered to replace them are being prevented from doing so by, amongst other things, the absence of facilities for obtaining visas to travel to the places where they are scheduled to join their ships – including the Schengen area.

At least 200,000 up to 300,000 seafarers currently need to be relieved and this number rises with every week that passes. Some of these seafarers have now spent 15 months or more continuously on board. An equal number of fresh crewmembers must travel to join ships if their long-serving colleagues are to be relieved.

First and foremost this is a humanitarian crisis that must be solved in order to protect seafarers that have been on ships for far too long. But the urgent need to solve this crisis also extends ashore. Without seafarers, ships cannot operate and cannot deliver goods necessary for every part of our economy. At a time of considerable stress for global and national economies, any interruption to the flow of trade could have devastating consequences for the recovery phase.

We acknowledge that all stakeholders in the industry have been working constantly over the past months to enable crew changes to happen. Guidance on measures to be taken by operators and other authorities so that seafarers are designated 'key' workers and their travel facilitated have been incorporated in IMO protocols. Similarly, the European Commission has issued guidance over the past months and

is coordinating operationally with Commission services, EU Member States and international organisations.

We therefore consider that the current situation now merits attention at the highest political level and ask for your support in ensuring this. We are, therefore, calling on all governments to join the intergovernmental efforts and sign and implement the commitments made in the ministerial statement of the International Maritime Summit on Crew Changes, held on 9 July 2020, and in particular:

- designate all seafarers, regardless of nationality, as “key workers” and facilitate their movement under conditions that safeguard their health and minimize the risks of COVID-19 infection.
- ensure that seafarers are able to join and leave their ships for repatriation, crew changes, shore leave and medical attention without impediment.
- introduce temporary measures, including the possibility of waivers, exemptions or other relaxations from any visa or documentary requirements that might normally apply to seafarers.
- create the necessary conditions for seafarer air corridors from the EU Member States and key labour supply countries.

While we welcome all these actions, as well as your government’s efforts, it is time now for the immediate involvement of all the heads of Member States to avoid a humanitarian and global trade crisis. Since Belgium plays a key role in the global supply chain, has one of the largest ports and airports in the EU and is an IMO Council member, we therefore respectfully request you to ensure Belgium leads by example by adopting the ministerial statements’ pledges nationally and steps up its own efforts.

We appreciate all the efforts Belgium is already making. However, we consider that there are still remaining obstacles in place for crew changes to be carried out in or via Belgium. We therefore request that the following actions are undertaken:

- it is crucially important that Belgium issues visas on arrival at the airport to on-signers proceeding to join any foreign flagged vessel in a Belgian port or to an on-signer that will be transiting via Belgium to join a vessel in another EU Member State.
- We strongly call on Belgium to authorise and provide temporary visa waivers for on- and off-signers in order to deal with the influx of requests over the coming months. While we understand that Belgian embassies are gradually returning to normal operations in dealing with visa applications, this will not suffice to deal with the estimated rise in demand for visas of around 2.5 times – 3 times the normal volume per month in the next few months. Such a visa waiver will be an important measure in facilitating and speeding up preparations for departures from third countries.

We trust you will use your position to make a difference in practice both through concrete measures in Belgium and by using your diplomatic influence to raise this matter at the highest level in meetings both with EU Member States and with governments around the world. This will be extremely important to ensure the hundreds of thousands of seafarers still waiting for crew changes can be relieved without any further delay.

On behalf of all the signatories of this letter your Cabinet will be approached for setting up a meeting with you, to discuss this urgent topic and how the actions can be facilitated further.

Yours respectfully,



Claes Berglund
President ECSA



Frank Moreels
President ETF



Guy Platten
Secretary General ICS



Stephen Cotton
Secretary General ITF



Tom Boardley
Secretary General
CLIA Europe



John W. Butler
President and CEO
World Shipping Council



Francesco Gargiulo
CEO
IMEC



Capt. Kuba Szymanski
Secretary General
INTERMANAGER



Katharina Stanzel
Managing Director
INTERTANKO



Kostas Gkonis
Secretary General
INTERCARGO



Janet Strode
General Manager
IPTA



David Loosley
Secretary General & CEO
BIMCO



Mr. Yuichi Sonoda
Secretary General
ASA

Annex: Joint Ministerial Statement of the International Maritime Virtual Summit on Crew Changes, Thursday 9 July 2020

Copied to: Vice-Premier ministre et ministre de la Justice, chargé de la Régie des Bâtiments, et ministre des Affaires européennes, M. Koen Geens

Ministre de la Mobilité, chargé de skeyes et de la Société nationale des chemins de fer belges, M. François Bellot

Ministre des Affaires sociales et de la Santé publique, et de l'Asile et la Migration, Mme Maggie De Block

Ministre de la Sécurité et de l'Intérieur, chargé du Commerce extérieur, M. Pieter de Crem

Ministre de l'Agenda numérique, des Télécommunications et de la Poste, chargé de la Simplification administrative, de la Lutte contre la fraude sociale, de la Protection de la vie privée et de la Mer du Nord, M. Philippe De Backer

ANNEX

Joint Ministerial Statement of the International Maritime Virtual Summit on Crew Changes Thursday 9 July 2020¹

1. Our collective efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic have demonstrated the critical need to prioritize the continued functioning of global supply chains to ensure the resilience of our national economies, and the importance of facilitating the safe and efficient operation of the maritime transportation system which moves over 80% of global trade.
2. Critical to this endeavour is the ability of shipping companies to continue conducting crew changes throughout the world, notwithstanding the restrictions applied by many national authorities in response to the pandemic.
3. We, as the representatives of governments, attending the International Maritime Summit on Crew Changes held on 9 July 2020 by the government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, are deeply concerned by the global crisis. Specifically, those created by ongoing obstacles affecting ship's crew changes, the impact on the well-being of seafarers and the impact that any failure by governments to resolve these issues will have on maritime transport, which must be permitted to continue to operate safely and efficiently throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. Specifically, we acknowledge, as a matter of urgent concern:
 - That the inability of ship operators worldwide to conduct ship's crew changes is the single most pressing maritime operational challenge to the safe and efficient movement of global trade;
 - At least 200,000 seafarers are estimated to require immediate repatriation, with many serving on extended crew contracts who are overdue to return home, in addition to a similar number of seafarers that urgently need to join their ships in order to allow the world's internationally trading vessels to continue to operate safely;
 - Seafarers' tours of duty cannot continue to be extended and need to be kept to a duration of less than 12 months, as set out by the Maritime Labour

¹<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-of-the-international-maritime-virtual-summit-on-crew-changes>.

Convention, 2006, as amended (MLC, 2006). The global shipping industry estimates that, since March 2020, only about 25% of normal crew changes have taken place. Apart from the humanitarian and crew welfare concerns, and issues of regulatory compliance, there is an increasing risk that fatigue and mental health issues could lead to serious maritime accidents;

- The complexity of facilitating ship's crew changes, regardless of the seafarers' nationality, requires concerted action as well as access to commercial flights to the principal seafarer countries of origin and those countries where crew changes take place;
- That the health and well-being of seafarers is paramount and is inextricably linked to the continuing safety and efficiency of ship operations.
- That the uncertainty around a possible second wave of the Covid 19, impose swift actions without further delay to allow crew changes, to avoid further and unimaginable consequences to the already fragile global supply chain, that rely on goods transported by ships
- That the lessons learned during the Covid 19 outbreak, assist to create international protocols in partnership with the maritime industry and the regulatory agencies, to provide practical instruments to facilitate shipping operations and seafarers to perform their essential role, in case of a recurrence of a global pandemic.

5. We therefore recognise the importance of the pledges set out below and, as a matter of urgency, to:

- (a) ENCOURAGE all IMO states to designate seafarers as "key workers" providing an essential service, to facilitate safe and unhindered movement for embarking or disembarking a vessel;
- (b) CONSIDER the legal possibilities for accepting internationally recognised documentation, such as International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers certificate, the International Labour Organization Seafarers' Identity Document (ILO 185) and a letter by the seafarers' company, carried by seafarers as evidence of their status as key workers, and purpose of their travel and movement for crew changes;
- (c) ENGAGE, nationally, multilaterally and bilaterally, in discussions about implementation, to the maximum extent possible, as appropriate to the circumstances that may prevail nationally or locally, of the Recommended Framework of Protocols for Ensuring Safe Ship Crew Changes and Travel during

the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic, circulated to IMO Member States as Circular Letter No.4204/Add.14 on 5 May 2020;

- (d) REVIEW, working in conjunction with our health, immigration and other relevant ministries, agencies and authorities, the necessity of any restrictions that may continue to apply, at national and/or local level, to the movement and travel of seafarers for the purpose of conducting ships' crew changes. This includes the possibility of allowing exemptions from quarantine or similar restrictions in accordance with relevant international rules, health regulatory guidelines as adopted by competent organisations and Industry such as the World Health Organisation, and the ability for ship owners to accommodate seafarers in hotels or designated shelters, should the quarantine be a national requirement, without delaying the ship's operations, once the crew change has taken place.
 - (e) CONSIDER, in liaison with our relevant ministries and authorities, including those responsible for immigration, temporary measures including (where possible under relevant law) the possibility of waivers, exemptions or other relaxations from any visa or documentary requirements that might normally apply to seafarers; and
 - (f) EXPLORE, in cooperation with ICAO and the aviation industry, ways of increasing access, as soon as possible, to commercial flights to and from the principal countries of origin of seafarers and the airports in reasonable proximity to those seaports where crew changes are effected and:
 - (g) URGE all IMO Members to take any necessary measures, within their area of jurisdiction, to ensure seafarers affected by the Covid-19 pandemic enjoy safe crew changes as well as repatriation to their home countries or to their place of ordinary residence.
6. We express our deepest appreciation to the world's seafarers who have continued tirelessly to operate ships and move trade throughout this global crisis, and pledge to take forward these actions at this Summit with the urgency and resolve needed by the situation.
7. Together, we can avert the global crisis that is unfolding at sea and play our part in helping the world defeat the coronavirus (COVID-19).

Government
United Kingdom
Australia
Denmark
France
Germany
Greece
Indonesia
Netherlands
Norway
Philippines
Saudi Arabia
Singapore
South Africa
United Arab Emirates
United States of America

The International Maritime Summit on Crew Changes was also attended by United Nations officials from the International Maritime Organization (Secretary-General Kitack Lim) and International Labour Organization (Ms. Corinne Vargha), and shipping industry representatives from the International Chamber of Shipping (Mr. Guy Platten), International Transport Workers' Federation (Mr. Stephen Cotton), UK Chamber of Shipping (Mr. Bob Sanguinetti), Nautilus International (Mark Dickinson) and Maritime UK (Harry Theochari).