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Circular Letter No.4393
4 May 2021

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

Subject: **World Maritime Day 2021**

Further to [Circular Letter No.4379](#) of 15 February 2021, which included the Secretary-General's message on the year's theme "Seafarers: at the core of shipping's future", the Secretary-General has the honour to enclose herewith the text of the background document to assist Member States in drafting their own communications for use in observing World Maritime Day. This year's celebration will take place on 30 September 2021.

The background document will be available for downloading in the three working languages of the Organization (English, French and Spanish) and the message is available in all of the official languages of the Organization (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish). Additionally, a video containing the Secretary-General's message is also available on the IMO website at www.imo.org.

In addition, the Secretary-General wishes to remind all Member States and international organizations of the Calendar of Events on the IMO website, which can be accessed at www.imo.org/en/About/Calendar.

The Calendar of Events provides the opportunity for greater visibility of the many events held around the world in support of World Maritime Day and the Day of the Seafarer. In the current situation caused by the pandemic, it presents an effective and easy-to-use platform to inform other Member States and international organizations, in advance, of relevant celebrations in support of both days, particularly online events that may be more widely attended. More information on the Calendar of Events is enclosed in [Circular Letter No.3889](#).

In order to promote the Day more widely, the Secretary-General encourages the authorities concerned to organize suitable events throughout the year to celebrate the Day, and inform the Secretariat of any such activities, including listing them on the calendar as described above.

Social media participation is also encouraged via Twitter, by using the hashtag #WorldMaritimeDay. Photographs of any events can also be sent to: media@imo.org.

ANNEX

WORLD MARITIME THEME FOR 2021 SEAFARERS: AT THE CORE OF SHIPPING'S FUTURE

Background document

Introduction

The World Maritime Theme for 2021 is dedicated to the seafarers who have shown tremendous fortitude, courage and perseverance in continuing to deliver global trade even as the COVID-19 pandemic persists.

This year's theme is "**Seafarers: at the core of shipping's future**". IMO puts seafarers at the heart of all our conversations by raising their profile and recognizing the valuable role they play now and in the future.

Seafarers are essential for the safe, secure and efficient operation of ships and contribute to the protection of the fragile marine environment. Safe navigation ensures the continuation of maritime trade, which is vital to the world's economy. Two million seafarers are continuously working to deliver 80% of global trade for the world's 7.8 billion people. 98,140 commercial vessels of 100 gross tons and above, equivalent to a capacity of 2.06 billion dwt, move close to 12 billion tonnes of trade. Without seafarers, the flow of vital goods, services and global commerce would grind to a halt, Sustainable Development Goals will not be met and post COVID-19 economic recovery will be impossible.

Seafarers have always been at the heart of IMO's work. IMO has addressed training of seafarers (the first international seafarer certification and training treaty, the [STCW Convention](#), was adopted in 1978), put the [human element](#) at the centre of the development or amendment of regulations, and recognized seafarers' contribution to shipping and world trade through the annual Day of the Seafarer campaign. In [2020](#), the tenth observance of the Day of the Seafarer campaign took on the theme "Seafarers are key workers".

This year provides an opportunity to delve into specific topics and issues relevant to the role of seafarers in maritime safety and security; protection of the marine environment; as well as seafarers' welfare; and how to ensure an appropriately trained and qualified future seafarer workforce, ready to meet the challenges of increased digitalization and automation.

Below is a non-exhaustive list of topics – some interlinked – deserving of greater consideration throughout this year and beyond.

COVID-19 pandemic and the crew change crisis

Seafarers' lives and livelihoods have been significantly challenged during the COVID-19 pandemic. The [crew change crisis](#) continues, despite calls for action at the highest level, including a UN General Assembly [Resolution](#). In April 2021, around 200,000 seafarers are stranded on board ships, and another 400,000 are unable join on board resulting in economic hardships.

Overly fatigued and mentally exhausted seafarers are being asked to continue to operate ships. Many of these seafarers have already spent more than a year at sea, well beyond their original contracts and acceptable safe working practices, without a proper rest and far away from their loved ones. Read their [testimonies here](#).

The IMO Seafarer Crisis Action Team ([SCAT](#)) continues to work to resolve numerous individual cases of seafarers in dire circumstances, work that started at the beginning of the pandemic in March last year.

More than 55 Member States have now designated seafarers as key workers who deserve special consideration. (see the latest list [here](#)). This is a positive step. This recognition facilitates safe and unhindered movement of seafarers, for embarking or disembarking a vessel and considers legal possibilities for accepting internationally recognized documentation carried by seafarers as evidence of their status as "key workers", and for the purpose of their travel and movement for crew change. This may also help seafarers when governments developing their national COVID-19 vaccine and immunization policies include them as a priority group for vaccination.

Every actor in the shipping sector should support and actively facilitate crew changes, not discourage them, for the sake of all seafarers who have been at sea for many months beyond their contracted time. IMO has continued to support and encourage governments, industry, labour and seafarers' charities involved in crew change through hosting series of regional webinars on the "challenges faced by seafarers and the identification of best practices during COVID-19 pandemic". The spirit of cooperation and collaboration between all stakeholders has been remarkable and must continue.

Shore leave

Seafarers have the right to go ashore while the ship on which they arrive is in port, and there should be no discrimination on grounds of nationality, race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, or social origin. Shore leave should be granted, irrespective of the flag State of the ship. It is essential for seafarers who spend many weeks at their workplace, with only work mates and managers for company. Those who work at sea need to get on shore to access phones and the internet to contact family, to seek welfare, social, medical, or psychological support if needed, and to have a break from the work environment.

If any request is turned down, the relevant public authorities must provide an explanation to the crew member and the master, which the seafarer or master can request to be provided in writing.

Health and well-being

Seafarer well-being has been severely tested in 2020, with seafarers unable to leave ships while others have been left without employment, unable to join ships.

The situation has compounded factors which make seafaring a profession that requires great resilience. A 2019 study found that isolation, loneliness, lack of shore leave, fear of criminalization, fear of job loss and separation from family all predispose seafarers to mental ill-health (IOSH, 2019, download report here <https://iosh.com/seafarerswellbeing>).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also impacted seafarers' ability to access routine medical care, or to get medical assistance in the event of an accident or health event. Due to their unforeseen longer periods on board, seafarers are facing expiration of essential medical prescriptions. IMO's SCAT has intervened in a number of cases to ensure [access to medical care](#).

Diversity in seafaring

It is important to create a work environment welcoming to all, where everyone feels valued and can perform at their best regardless of gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexual orientation or any other status.

In respect of gender, equality statistics suggest that globally only around 2% of seafarers are women. There is a long way to go to substantially increase the percentage of women seafarers on board ships.

In 2019, IMO invited suggestions on the changes that need to be made, so that shipping does not miss out on the huge pool of talented women (click for the [make one change virtual wall](#)).

Through its [Women in Maritime](#) programme, IMO supports regional Women in Maritime associations across the world to develop networking and mentoring opportunities for women across the maritime sector, including seafaring. The tide is turning, and there are many role models leading the way. (See the video, [Turning the Tide](#) and see our Women in Maritime [photo bank](#)).

More needs to be done to improve diversity in seafaring – by Governments, by training institutes, by companies, so that equal opportunities could be given to all.

Fair treatment of seafarers

Shipping is international, crossing many jurisdictions, and seafarers have rights to due process under the law. IMO has adopted Guidelines on [fair treatment](#) of seafarers in the event of a maritime accident. Furthermore, the Legal Committee has agreed to include a new output in its work programme on the fair treatment of seafarers detained on suspicion of committing maritime crimes.

Seafarer abandonment

Abandonment is a serious issue, impacting hundreds of seafarers annually. IMO has been working with the International Labour Organization (ILO) and industry partners for a number of years to address seafarer abandonment. Mandatory provisions for financial security in the case of abandonment are included in ILO's Maritime Labour Convention (MLC 2006), following joint ILO/IMO work, including developing guidelines.

ILO and IMO have established a joint [database](#) on reported incidents of abandonment of seafarers (it includes all cases reported after 1 January 2004). During 2020 the number of reported cases to date is more than 93, a significant increase over the 40 reported during 2019. Some cases were linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. To April 2021, 26 new cases had been reported to the database, continuing this alarming trend.

The Legal Committee has agreed to develop guidelines for port State and flag State authorities on how to deal with seafarer abandonment cases, with a target completion year of 2022.

Retention and recruitment of seafarers

The last (2015) [BIMCO/ISF survey](#) predicted a shortfall of officers by 2025. The 2021 [seafarer workforce](#) report is in preparation. Recruitment and retention could be seriously affected by the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on seafarers.

Maritime safety and security

The safety of ships is dependent on safe ship construction, design and operation, as well as having appropriate systems in place to ensure safety of life at sea, including life-saving appliances and fire-fighting systems. Seafarers are at the sharp end, taking and making decisions to ensure ships are operated safely at all times.

Designated ship security officers oversee all shipboard security policies, programmes and procedures, in line with the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code and IMO's wider security-related guidance, but all seafarers have a part to play.

Piracy and armed robbery against ships and other illicit activities remain a concern, despite progress in reducing incidents in some areas. In recent years, particular focus has been placed on tackling piracy and armed robbery at sea in the Gulf of Aden and the wider Western Indian Ocean, as well as in the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa. While some progress has been made in those regions to suppress piracy, armed robbery and other illicit maritime activities, seafarers are urged to remain vigilant when navigating through those regions, since these threats have not been "eliminated" and need to be taken seriously.

IMO is particularly concerned about the rising number of incidents of piracy and armed robbery in the Gulf of Guinea, especially about the increase in the number of incidents involving kidnapping of crew; and has taken action to raise awareness of the issue, assisting countries of the region in devising national maritime security policies and enhancing interregional cooperation and collaboration.

In addition to these traditional threats, seafarers must also be aware of how to address non-traditional threats to shipping that have emerged over the last few years, such as cyber risks.

Protecting the environment, sustainable shipping

Seafarers have responsibilities to ensure ships operate and navigate safely, avoiding accidents and preventing accidental pollution such as oil spills. They must ensure operational wastes – including sewage, garbage and plastic litter – are dealt with according to international regulations, to avoid pollution. Seafarers are also at the core of implementing more recent mandatory requirements, such as ballast water management, and can be proactive in saving energy on board, to address GHG emissions from ships.

Digitalization

Digitalization – such as electronic data exchange of information – has become part of shipping and will no doubt further develop in the future. Digitalization of trade and customs procedures can ensure the fast and secure exchange of data and information, facilitating seafarers' administrative work. Current developments concerning the widespread establishment of maritime single windows will play an important part in this.

Digitalization has the added benefit of minimizing the need for physical interactions – an important consideration in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, it will improve access to digital technology for seafarers, including e-mail and the internet. Increased connectivity can benefit seafarers physically and psychologically.

Automation

Several IMO Committees are currently conducting a scoping exercise to determine how the safe, secure and environmentally sound operation of Maritime Autonomous Surface Ships (MASS) may be introduced in IMO instruments. The integration of new and advancing technologies in shipping will have an impact on personnel, both on board and ashore.

The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) and the World Maritime University (WMU) [Transport 2040](#) report assessed how automation will affect the future of work in the transport industry, focusing on technological changes and automation in road, air, rail and maritime transport. The report concludes that the introduction of automation in global transport will be "evolutionary, rather than revolutionary" and that "despite high levels of automation, qualified human resources with the right skill sets will still be needed in the foreseeable future". Technological advances will inevitably affect shipping but will be gradual and vary by region. Workers will be affected in different ways based on their skill levels and the varying degrees of preparedness of different countries.

There are a number of key questions: How will the seafarer of the future manage the challenges related to an increasing level of technology and automation in maritime transport? How will the new technologies impact on the nature of jobs in the industry? What standards will seafarers be required to meet with respect to education, training and certification to qualify them for the jobs of the future?

In this regard, the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers ([STCW](#)), 1978, is the international instrument which would accommodate those challenges to make sure that seafarers remain appropriately trained and qualified, ready for the future.
