



JOINT STATEMENT URGING CONTINUED COLLABORATION TO ADDRESS THE CREW CHANGE CRISIS, SAFEGUARD SEAFARER HEALTH AND SAFETY, AND AVOID SUPPLY CHAIN DISRUPTIONS DURING THE ONGOING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

28 February 2022

The continuously rapid spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, including the Omicron variant, is a stark reminder that the COVID-19 pandemic is not over. The epidemiological situation continues to evolve, posing renewed challenges to societies and economies, including to international shipping, which is critical for global trade and sustainable development.

After Omicron was designated as a “variant of concern” (VOC) by the World Health Organization (WHO), many countries reimposed stringent measures, such as travel bans, which have affected seafarers and other transport workers. As a result, the already fragile global supply chain is facing increased congestions and delays.

While the impacts of the Omicron variant and related policy responses depend on a range of factors and vary considerably, common and proactive approaches are needed to address evolving challenges to international shipping and its key workers, and to minimize adverse impacts on seafarers and their families, as well as on global trade, supply chains and sustainable development, while continuing to protect local communities.

The plight of seafarers

Throughout the pandemic, the world’s 1.9 million seafarers, many of whom are from developing countries, have played a vital role in ensuring the continuous flow of critical goods along supply chains, hence keeping the world’s shipping and trade moving.

However, as a result of some of the international traffic-related measures that have been put in place to mitigate the health and health systems impacts of the spread of the virus, many seafarers are still unable to leave ships, remaining stranded at sea far beyond the expiration dates of their contracts and the default 11-month maximum period of continuous service on board, as required by the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006, as amended (MLC, 2006). For the same reasons, some seafarers have been unable to join ships to replace stranded crews, leading to a significant loss of income and resulting in hardship for seafarers and their families. This humanitarian crew change crisis has resulted in significant mental strain, fatigue and consequently increased the risk of accidents, imperilling working conditions in the shipping sector.

While the number of seafarers that remain stranded has decreased, it remains considerable and further efforts must be made to rectify the situation and alleviate the continuing crisis. Moreover, the full impact of the Omicron variant and related response measures on crew changes is not yet clear and further VOCs may yet emerge.

To maintain recent positive trends, governments and industry, in collaboration with international organizations, need to scale up their common efforts to limit the effects of emerging variants on crew changes while safeguarding the health and wellbeing of seafarers and global communities.

Vaccination challenges

WHO has recommended that seafarers be included as one of the groups of transportation workers to be prioritized for COVID-19 vaccination in instances of limited supplies.¹ While seafarers are increasingly gaining access to COVID-19 vaccines, numerous challenges remain. For example, while the supply of COVID-19 vaccines has largely increased in the past months, there are persistent inequities in the volume available across countries. In addition, the recognized duration of the validity of vaccination certificates, adopted by some countries as the sole condition to grant entry, or as to facilitate and expedite international traffic by others, is subject to constant readjustments, generating additional uncertainty and disruption. Vaccine hesitancy among crew members and limited access to booster vaccines is also posing further challenges.

Health document authentication for travellers and border authorities

Virtually since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, a variety of different national and regional approaches have been developed to the introduction of COVID-19-related documents, and their format, to mitigate the impact of the spread of the virus in the context of international traffic. Such heterogeneity poses challenges related to interoperability, and the ability of border, immigration and public health authorities to verify and validate such documents. WHO has published technical specifications and implementation guidance to support countries on appropriate deployment of digital COVID-19 certificates for vaccination and will soon release a similar guidance document on digital COVID-19 certificates for test results.²

Health document authentication requires that Member States participate in a trust network. Multiple international trust networks are currently in use. One of the services that comprises the technical infrastructure of a trust network are the public key directories of participating entities. For example, ICAO published its first Health Master List on 31 January 2022, a new data resource for States and aviation stakeholders to aid in the more efficient and secure authentication of traveller health certificates.³ Issuing authorities can work with ICAO to ensure that public key certificates needed to verify their health proofs are included in the Master List and thereby publicly shared. There is no cost associated with inclusion of certificates in the List. The Health Master List concept is based on the same principles as the generic ICAO Master List now used to verify electronic travel documents and will complement existing national and/or regional solutions and provide an essential international mechanism for sharing public key certificates.

¹ WHO SAGE roadmap for prioritizing uses of COVID-19 vaccines, available at

<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/who-sage-roadmap-for-prioritizing-uses-of-covid-19-vaccines>

² Digital Documentation of COVID-19 certificates: vaccination status: technical specifications and implementation guidance, 27 August 2021, available at https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-Digital_certificates-vaccination-2021.1.

³ <https://www.icao.int/Security/FAL/PKD/Pages/ICAO-Master-List.aspx>.

Access to COVID tests and personal protective equipment (PPE)

Testing is a critical cornerstone of the COVID-19 pandemic response, enabling countries to shape the delivery of health care, to protect vulnerable populations, and, depending on the SARS-CoV-2 virus transmission scenario experienced, to suppress its spread. Furthermore, the use of appropriate PPE, including face masks, is one of the main tools to enable individuals to protect themselves and others from infection, particularly in closed and overcrowded settings where physical distancing may be difficult to respect, such as on board ships. Seafarers often find themselves in situations where access to COVID-19 testing and PPE is limited, due to the difficulties of receiving tests on board. Employers should ensure that these medical supplies are readily available to prevent or contain potential outbreaks on board.

Calls to action

The International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), and the World Health Organization (WHO) are reiterating their calls for continued collaborative efforts to address these ongoing challenges. Recognizing the critical role of the maritime sector in keeping trade flowing during the global fight against COVID-19, the four organizations have throughout been highlighting the pandemic's impacts' risks to shipping and global sustainable trade and development.⁴

⁴ IMO-UNCTAD joint statement in support of keeping ships moving, ports open and cross-border trade flowing during the covid-19 pandemic, available at https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/osg_2020-06-08_stat01_en.pdf;

- Joint Statement ILO-IMO-WHO on the medical certificates of seafarers and ship sanitation certificates due to the COVID-19 outbreak, available at [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/2020-04-22-ilo-who-imo-joint-statement-on-medical-certificates-of-seafarers-ship-sanitation-certificates-22-april-sg-\(003\).pdf?sfvrsn=6afdd464_2](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/2020-04-22-ilo-who-imo-joint-statement-on-medical-certificates-of-seafarers-ship-sanitation-certificates-22-april-sg-(003).pdf?sfvrsn=6afdd464_2);

- Joint Statement IMO-ICAO-ILO on designation of seafarers, marine personnel, fishing vessel personnel, offshore energy sector personnel, aviation personnel, air cargo supply chain personnel, and service provider personnel at airports and ports as key workers, and on facilitation of crew changes in ports and airports in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, available at <https://wwwcdn.imo.org/localresources/en/MediaCentre/HotTopics/Documents/COVID%20CL%204204%20adds/Circular%20Letter%20No.4204-Add.18%20-%20Joint%20Statement%20Imo-Icao-Ilo%20On%20Designation%20Of%20Seafarers.pdf>;

- Joint Statement ICAO-ILO-IMO-WHO-IOM calling on all Governments to prioritize COVID-19 vaccination for seafarers and aircrew, available at <https://www.who.int/news/item/25-03-2021-joint-statement-on-prioritization-of-covid-19-vaccination-for-seafarers-and-aircrew>;

- Joint IMO/ILO statement on upholding medical assistance obligations to seafarers and accelerating seafarer vaccination programmes, available at [https://wwwcdn.imo.org/localresources/en/MediaCentre/HotTopics/Documents/COVID%20CL%204204%20adds/Circular%20Letter%20No.4204-Add.42%20-%20Coronavirus%20\(Covid-19\)%20-%20Joint%20Imollo%20Statement%20On%20UpholdingMedical%20Assistance%20Obligations.pdf](https://wwwcdn.imo.org/localresources/en/MediaCentre/HotTopics/Documents/COVID%20CL%204204%20adds/Circular%20Letter%20No.4204-Add.42%20-%20Coronavirus%20(Covid-19)%20-%20Joint%20Imollo%20Statement%20On%20UpholdingMedical%20Assistance%20Obligations.pdf);

- UNCTAD Policy Brief "Strengthening international response and cooperation to address the seafarer crisis and keep global supply chains open during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic", available at https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/presspb2021d9_en.pdf;

- IMO Assembly resolution on Comprehensive action to address seafarers' challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic (resolution A.1160(32)), see <https://www.imo.org/en/MediaCentre/PressBriefings/pages/A32Outcome.aspx>;

Recalling in this context also UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/75/17,⁵ today, ILO, IMO, UNCTAD, and WHO urge all stakeholders to ensure the continued safe operation of shipping, and to keep ships moving, ports open and cross-border trade flowing during the pandemic.

We call on Governments, national and local authorities, and all relevant stakeholders, including employers, to take the following critical actions.

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- WHO technical considerations for implementing a risk-based approach to international travel in the context of COVID-19, available at <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/342212>;
 - WHO implementation guide for the management of COVID-19 on board cargo ships and fishing vessels, available at <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/350941>;
 - Joint Action Group to review the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the world's transport workers and the global supply chain, available at https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_831672/lang--en/index.htm;
 - IMO Circular Letter No.4204/Add.35/Rev.- Designation of seafarers as key workers, available at [https://wwwcdn.imo.org/localresources/en/MediaCentre/HotTopics/Documents/COVID%20CL%204204%20adds/Circular%20Letter%20No.4204-Add.35-Rev.10%20-%20Coronavirus%20\(Covid-19\).pdf](https://wwwcdn.imo.org/localresources/en/MediaCentre/HotTopics/Documents/COVID%20CL%204204%20adds/Circular%20Letter%20No.4204-Add.35-Rev.10%20-%20Coronavirus%20(Covid-19).pdf).

⁵ UN General Assembly resolution 75/17 on international cooperation to address challenges faced by seafarers as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic to support global supply chains, available at <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/75/17>.

1. Provide seafarers with immediate access to medical care as well as facilitate their medical evacuation when the required medical care cannot be provided on board.
2. Designate seafarers as “key workers”, providing an essential service, to facilitate maritime crew changes and safe movement across borders, and recognize relevant documentation for this purpose.
3. Prioritize the vaccination of seafarers, as far as practicable, in national COVID-19 vaccination programmes and exempt them from any national policy requiring proof of COVID-19 vaccination as the only mandatory condition for entry, in accordance with WHO recommendations.
4. Provide or administer COVID-19 tests and appropriate PPE to seafarers, including PCR tests where necessary, to facilitate the identification of cases on board or at the port, and to facilitate the movement of seafarers, including shore leave and crew changes.
5. Ensure the consistent application of internationally agreed protocols and standards, including those for seafarers’ travel and vaccination documents, coordinate appropriately, and take measures to avoid punitive measures, fines and excessive costs.
6. Adopt the latest legal instruments, including the MLC, 2006 and the Seafarers’ Identity Documents Convention (Revised), 2003, as amended (No. 185), and ensure their implementation.
7. Implement the recently updated WHO sector-specific guidance for the management of COVID-19 on board cargo ships and fishing vessels, published in December 2021, which, among other issues, highlights the importance of non-medical interventions, such as the use of face masks irrespective of vaccination status.
8. Provide, where relevant, public key certificates associated with any health proof to relevant trust networks, such as ICAO for international travel.
9. Continue to collaborate to ensure that relevant guidance is regularly updated, in line with developments and evolving scientific insights; and mechanisms are in place to reduce and effectively respond to medical emergencies at sea.
10. Undertake concerted collaborative efforts to keep seafarers safe and limit disruption to supply chains, as well as prevent the unchecked spread of emerging VOCs, which could prolong the pandemic and its wide-ranging socioeconomic consequences.