



United Nations Global Compact

UN leaders urge companies relying on shipping supply chains to undertake urgent measures to protect seafarers' rights

New due diligence tool aims to help businesses uphold their responsibility to protect human rights at sea as new COVID variants threaten to further delay crew changes

UNITED NATIONS, New York, 6 May 2021 – A wide-ranging human rights checklist has today been issued to business enterprises engaged with the maritime industry to protect seafarers stranded on ships due to new COVID-19 variants and government-imposed travel restrictions, under a joint initiative by the UN Global Compact, the UN Human Rights Office, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO).

The Human Rights Due Diligence Tool for cargo owners and charterers has been issued amid concerns that the number of crew stranded working beyond their contracts at sea by COVID-19 restrictions could surge from the current level of 200,000, potentially returning to the peak of 400,000 seafarers at the height of the crew change crisis in September 2020. UN agencies hope the new guidance will help ensure that the working conditions and human rights of seafarers are respected and comply with international standards.

The new guidance aims to ensure that seafarers have their rights safeguarded in areas such as physical and mental health, access to family life and freedom of movement. Whilst recognizing the importance of the maritime industry in transporting more than 80% of global trade goods, UN agencies have expressed concern at [reports of seafarers](#) working beyond the 11-month maximum limit of service on board set out by the ILO Maritime Labour Convention (MLC).

The UN agencies have also expressed strong concern at reports that companies engaged in international trade are avoiding chartering vessels where a crew change is due, with some demanding [‘no crew change’ clauses](#) in charter party agreements, preventing needed crew changeovers and adding further pressure on the maritime industry. UN agencies have reminded that under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), companies engaged with the maritime industry have a distinct responsibility to respect the human rights of seafarers as workers along their value chain.

The new human rights tool complements current industry-led collective action, such as the [Neptune Declaration on Seafarer Wellbeing](#), which has been signed by more than 750 companies. The tool aims to provide guidance and a checklist for cargo owners, charterers and logistics providers to conduct human rights due diligence across their supply chains to identify, prevent, mitigate and address adverse human rights impacts for seafarers impacted by the ongoing Covid-19 crisis.



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Sanda Ojiambo, Executive Director and CEO of the UN Global Compact said: “The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the fragility of global supply chains as seafarers continue to endure tremendous, and yet largely invisible, hardship and suffering. The maritime industry is responsible for transporting over 80% of global trade goods and so it must ensure it builds resilience to future shocks. The mental and physical wellbeing of seafarers must be a priority and this tool is an important step in building awareness of how to address human rights abuses in the maritime sector. It sends a powerful message of the importance of incorporating maritime workers in due diligence mapping to ensure that adverse human rights impacts are identified, prevented, mitigated and addressed.”

Guy Ryder, ILO Director General, said: “As the ILO Committee of Experts said in its general observation last December, it is precisely at times of crisis that the protective coverage of the MLC, 2006, assumes its full significance and needs to be most scrupulously applied. This is even more so given that the Convention contains only minimum standards for the protection of seafarers’ rights. The ILO has urged Governments to ensure the protection of seafarers’ rights, and welcomes this initiative that will help businesses to play their part in this collective effort”.

Kitack Lim, IMO Secretary General, said: “Seafarers are at the heart of the global supply chain. They are also at the mercy of COVID-19 restrictions on travel and transit. This has led to hundreds of thousands of seafarers being denied repatriation, crew changes, shore leave and ultimately being forced to stay working on ships long beyond their contracts. It is incumbent on everyone involved with shipping, across the entire supply and logistics chain, to ensure seafarers rights are protected. This tool is an important step forward, providing a practical approach for cargo owners, charterers and logistic providers to consider the human rights of seafarers and ensure they are put first and foremost as they work to deliver the goods that people need and want.”

Michele Bachelet, High Commissioner for Human Rights, said: “The COVID-19 seafarer’s crew change crisis has put the spot on one the weakest links in global supply chains. This is an urgent and grave humanitarian and human rights crisis that is impacting the lives of thousands of maritime workers. All companies involved in global supply chains may be linked to this crisis. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights require that companies identify whether they are involved with the crisis, including through their business relationships, and take any necessary measure to seek to address the situation.”

Guy Platten, International Chamber of Shipping Secretary General, said: “The [recent Suez Canal incident](#) has reminded governments and the markets just how important global shipping is to the supply chains. Seafarers are continuing to work to maintain global trade through exceptional circumstances, and the Suez incident has only exacerbated the already dire crew change crisis. Seafarers must not be forgotten now the canal is open again, and we call on businesses to urgently adopt these important recommendations.”



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Stephen Cotton, International Transport Workers' Federation General Secretary, said: "For far too long, shipping has been a human rights blind spot for global brands. Responsible companies in today's world want to understand how they or partners in their supply chains might be violating human rights, even inadvertently. That's why in the midst of the crew change crisis, the launch of this tool couldn't be more timely. It spells out exactly the questions that companies need to ask their suppliers or charterers about what's happening to seafarers in their supply chains, and provides worker-led pathways for monitoring and enforcement to remedy any violations or mistreatment."

The International Transport Workers' Federation, the International Chamber of Shipping, the Institute for Human Rights and Business, the Rafto Foundation for Human Rights, and the OECD actively contributed to the development of the tool. The tool is supported by the Sustainable Shipping Initiative, the World Economic Forum, the Global Maritime Forum, the Ethical Trading Initiative, and [The Consumer Goods Forum](#), who welcome this key initiative in addressing the Covid-19 crew change crisis.

Managing Director of The Consumer Goods Forum, Wai-Chan Chan, said: Wai-Chan Chan, Managing Director of The Consumer Goods Forum, said, "The Consumer Goods Forum welcomes this new tool to urgently support the safety, health, and wellbeing of those working at sea. As our [Board of Directors wrote to the UN Secretary-General](#) last fall, not only has the Covid-19 crisis disrupted the maritime industry's contribution to global supply chains, but it has also inadvertently created a modern form of forced labour. This is an unacceptable situation and we support the call for all actors across sectors to work collaboratively and quickly to resolve it."

Johannah Christensen, Managing Director, Head of Projects & Programmes, Global Maritime Forum, said: "We are witnessing a humanitarian tragedy on the world's ocean. As one of the architects behind the Neptune Declaration on Seafarer Wellbeing and Crew Change, we welcome the Human Rights Due Diligence Tool. We call on all stakeholders to work together to put an end to the crew change crisis to protect the 1.6 million seafarers who continue to face extreme risk to their safety and livelihoods."

Margi Van Gogh, Head of Supply Chain & Transport Industries, World Economic Forum: "This pandemic continues to highlight the central role that transport workers and seafarers play in enabling global trade and recovery. Supply system resilience requires collaboration across the private and public sector. Such resilience can only be achieved through assuring the safety, well-being and human rights of those responsible for moving the essential goods and food we all rely on. The Forum applauds the collective action that resulted in development of a valuable guidance tool, comprising practical checklists that cargo owners, charterers and logistics providers can reference to ensure human rights impacts for our seafarers, and indeed all essential transport workers are addressed, and future risks can be mitigated. Keeping people and goods moving safely is not only an obligation, it is vital for business continuity and a sustainable global recovery."



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Andrew Stephens, Executive Director, Sustainable Shipping Initiative, said: “The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting crew change crisis has highlighted the critical role that seafarers play in the global economy, keeping our hospitals, pharmacies, retail and food chains supplied. At the same time, it has made clear many of the labour and human rights risks for seafarers worldwide. By providing concrete, clear guidelines for charterers and cargo owners, this due diligence tool enables shipping stakeholders to better understand, identify, and address the labour and human rights risks exacerbated as a result of this crisis, paving the way for increased collaboration and dialogue to address long-term impacts.”

Peter McAllister, Ethical Trading Initiative Executive Director, said: “Seafarers were initially one of the invisible victims of COVID-19, which shone a light on exploitative practices in the shipping industry. We are therefore very pleased to see the Seafarers Checklist that has been developed in rapid time in consultation with the International Transport Workers’ Federation and the International Chamber of Shipping to help address this situation. We urge business to use this tool to help improve the working conditions for seafarers and underpin a more sustainable shipping industry”

NOTES TO EDITORS

About the United Nations Global Compact

As a special initiative of the UN Secretary-General, the United Nations Global Compact is a call to companies everywhere to align their operations and strategies with Ten Principles in the areas of human rights, labour, environment and anti-corruption. Our ambition is to accelerate and scale the global collective impact of business by upholding the Ten Principles and delivering the Sustainable Development Goals through accountable companies and ecosystems that enable change. With more than 12,000 companies and 3,000 non-business signatories based in over 160 countries, and 69 Local Networks, the UN Global Compact is the world’s largest corporate sustainability initiative — one Global Compact uniting business for a better world.

For more information, follow [@globalcompact](#) on social media and visit our website at unglobalcompact.org.

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