



PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE
UNITED NATIONS | NEW YORK

12 October 2020

Excellencies,

I have the honour to transmit herewith a letter dated 6 October 2020 from the Secretary-General of the United Nations addressed to me in my capacity as President of the thirtieth Meeting of States Parties to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

The letter was prepared by the Secretary-General in view of his responsibility to report to all States Parties, pursuant to article 319 of the Convention, on issues of a general nature that have arisen with respect to the Convention.

Please accept, Excellencies, the assurances of my highest consideration.

H.E. Burhan Gafoor

President of the thirtieth Meeting of States
Parties to the United Nations Convention
on the Law of the Sea

Representatives of States Parties
to the United Nations Convention
on the Law of the Sea



THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

6 October 2020

Dear Mr. President,

In keeping with my responsibility to report to all States Parties, pursuant to Article 319 of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, on issues of a general nature, relevant to States Parties, that have arisen with respect to the Convention, I take this opportunity to express my deep concern regarding the health and safety of thousands of seafarers around the world affected by travel restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This situation has left an estimated 300,000 seafarers stranded on vessels at sea, in some cases for over 17 months, contrary to international conventions on maritime labour, shipping and the law of the sea.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating health, economic and social consequences globally, the current plight of seafarers around the world needs urgent attention. The situation is increasingly serious as fatigued seafarers cannot operate indefinitely, and disruptions to international shipping would have devastating consequences.

Since the outset of the pandemic, I have made several public appeals, including on the Day of the Seafarer, for governments to designate seafarers and other marine personnel as “key workers” and to facilitate safe crew changeovers, cross-border travel and access by seafarers to medical treatment. I reiterated this call and my growing concerns on 24 September 2020, on the occasion of World Maritime Day.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the two million seafarers employed in the shipping sector are substantial. I recently reported to States Parties on the situation in the context of my report on major developments relating to Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea (see A/75/340, paragraphs 7-9, 31-34). Among the challenges outlined in the report, seafarers have endured insufficient personal protective equipment and medical care on board vessels; lack of access to shoreside medical care and welfare services; and increased stress, isolation and social pressures.

His Excellency
Mr. Burhan Gafoor
President of the Thirtieth Meeting of States Parties
to the United Nations Convention on the
Law of the Sea
New York

The inability of vessel operators to change crews, leading to extended periods on board, was reported as being particularly problematic. Seafarers have also faced unilateral or unlawful extensions of tours of duty, prolonged confinement on board ships ordered to anchorage or remote berths and unilateral termination of contracts, with some unable to leave their ships, be repatriated or seek urgent medical assistance. Incidences of seafarer abandonment continues to occur. In addition to the humanitarian aspects, this unfolding crisis could also potentially result in endangering the safety and security of navigation.

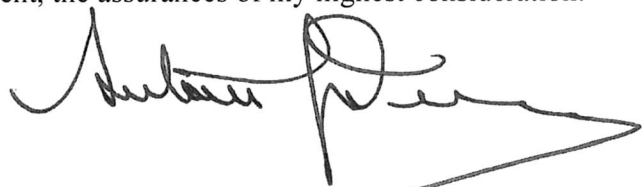
The International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), as well as other specialized agencies and bodies of the United Nations continue to coordinate urgent action to address the situation, including through joint statements calling attention to the particular vulnerability of seafarers and the provision of comprehensive guidance and protocols to allow for safe and secure crew changes.

In a Circular dated 4 September 2020, the Secretary-General of the IMO requested the Member States of the IMO to consider raising the issue of seafarers and the crew change crisis during the high-level week of the seventy-fifth session of the General Assembly. During a high-level side event organized in the margins of the General Assembly on 24 September 2020, international organizations, seafarer organizations, shipping industry leaders and businesses discussed the situation of seafarers and called for coordinated actions by all stakeholders.

The international community has a responsibility to undertake concerted efforts to address this impending humanitarian crisis. As shipping accounts for approximately 80 per cent of global trade, this ongoing situation could also have significant impacts on the global economy and international supply chains that are critical for the COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery.

I should be most grateful if you would bring the present letter to the attention of the States Parties to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. I would urge them to take every action possible, including by fully implementing their obligations under the Convention to take such measures for ships flying their flags as are necessary to ensure safety at sea, including with regard to the crewing of ships, labour conditions and the training of crews, taking into account the applicable international instruments.

Please accept, Mr. President, the assurances of my highest consideration.



António Guterres