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Avinash Kumar



Avinash Kumar has completed his Ph.D. in International Investment Law from the Dept. of Law & Governance, Central University of South Bihar. His research work is on "International Investment Agreement and State's right to regulate Foreign Investment." He qualified UGC-NET and has been selected for the prestigious ICSSR Doctoral Fellowship. He is an alumnus of the Faculty of Law, University of Delhi. Formerly he has been elected as Students Union President of Law Centre-1, University of Delhi. Moreover, he completed his LL.M. from the University of Delhi (2014-16), dissertation on "Cross-border Merger & Acquisition"; LL.B. from the University of Delhi (2011-14), and B.A. (Hons.) from Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi. He has also obtained P.G. Diploma in IPR from the Indian Society of International Law, New Delhi. He has qualified UGC – NET examination and has been awarded ICSSR – Doctoral Fellowship. He has published six-plus articles and presented 9 plus papers in national and international seminars/conferences. He participated in several workshops on research methodology and teaching and learning.

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COVID-19 AND SHIPPING: A GLITCH TO THE MAINSTAY OF GLOBAL TRADE AND ECONOMY

AUTHORED BY - MEENA.P

ABSTRACT

Shipping, the pillar of international trade was affected drastically due to the implications of Covid-19 pandemic. The threats to shipping sector effectuated hurdles to other sectors of the economy as well. The industry which is accountable for the huge trade possibilities is facing the same consequences confronted during the financial crisis of 2008¹. The demand for the products went down led to the reduction in cargos being transported. The consumption and production activities ceased which negatively impacted the global supply chains. The crew changes were cancelled as well as prorogued due to difficulties of traveling, visa restrictions, border closures, quarantine requirements, and flight cancelations ordained by several countries around the globe because of which the seafarers suffered the most. The seafarers were worried about their family, financial position, and employment being compromised. High workload, fatigue, negative emotions, extended contracts, stress, fear, and feeling logged onboard exasperated them all the time. The shipping industries faced several challenges by the dint of port closures, less demand and supply, disputes between owners and charters. New government policies and regulations must be adopted so that the recovery of shipping industries and international trade becomes easier.

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic threw spoke in the wheels of the steel boxes carried by the huge vessels which were foredoomed to reach at your doorstep without a second thought. Sudden global demand for goods due to supercharged online shopping accelerated the cost of the products but the vessels remaining idle on the territorial waters. Covid 19 posed to be a great threat to several sectors however the shipping industry was never an exception. Shipping, responsible for 90% of the world trade pertained to be the lifeblood of the global economy generates an income of half a trillion US Dollars in freight rates annually.² Howbeit at this moment in time, the industry is on the other side of the fence. The shipping sector is undergoing a similar set of

¹ International Chamber of Shipping (ICS), *Shipping and the 2008 Financial Crisis: Lessons Learned*, <https://www.ics-shipping.org/2020/12/02/shipping-and-the-2008-financial-crisis-lessons-learned/>

² United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *Review of Maritime Transport 2020*, https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/rmt2020_en.pdf (stating that shipping handles about 90% of global trade and generates approximately half a trillion USD in freight rates annually).

circumstances confronted during the financial crisis of 2008³ which resulted in the disruption of global economic stability. A report released by UNCTAD in November 2020 declares that the global maritime trade has dropped by 4.1% in 2020⁴.ⁱ When such a downturn was picked up on, it was indispensable for the shipping companies and the associated companies to cut the costs and the budgets. Shipping companies faced multivarious challenges that intimidated them to shut down leaving the workforce unemployed. The transportation and carrying sector along with travel opportunities for the people were negatively impacted.

The issues intensified as different countries impose different rules and regulations regarding travel restrictions and crew changes. Therefore, policies establishing clear, simple, and consistent rules and guidelines must be adopted by the countries so that it organizes standardized crew changes making it smoother and quicker for the seafarers to get repatriated. The only relief bought to light is the internet connection and communication made with their family and friends via phones. Augmenting the positive attitude, supporting, and recognizing the seafarers' uneasiness and discomforts by the higher authorities would boost up their mental health. Getting them the necessary supplies such as PPE, and medicines as well as enabling shore to leave for purchasing their personal needs, and a visit to the doctor would also soothe them from the tensions and stress that they are suffering from. Many companies are trying to undermine the national standards peculiar to the replacement of crew and wages of the seafarers as a result of cost and budget downturns. The seafarers are working round the clock high-mindedly living through the risks of Covid 19 to ensure that vital goods and medical supplies are transported to perpetuate the global supply chains moving. Seafarers play the main character role in the shipping industry thus the governments must safeguard their rights, interests, and economic status of any work that they do. The seafarers must also be given the provision for additional employment and job security in case of layoff. Our little-known heroes of the seas should be treated in the right manner by the maritime authorities to keep an eye on the requirements of the seafarers.

IMPLICATIONS FACED BY SEAFARERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

When the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the globe, it brought life to a near halt in many parts of the world. But amidst the lockdowns and restrictions, while people stayed home and

³ International Maritime Organization (IMO), *Annual Report 2020*, <https://www.imo.org/en/OurWork/Pages/Annual-Report.aspx>

⁴ https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/rmt2020_en.pdf.

industries slowed, there was one group of workers who continued tirelessly—seafarers. These men and women form the backbone of global trade, operating the ships that carry around 90% of the world's goods⁵. Yet, their struggles during the pandemic were profound and often overlooked. While ships remained afloat and goods reached their destinations, the human faces behind these operations endured some of the most challenging conditions imaginable.

Seafarers found themselves caught in an unprecedented crisis. Many were stranded at sea for months beyond their contractual periods because strict travel bans, quarantine rules, and cancelled flights prevented crew changes. Imagine being away from your family, your home, your normal life—not for weeks but for months on end, confined to the cramped quarters of a ship. The emotional toll of such isolation was heavy. Without the usual shore leave, there was no relief from the monotony and stress of shipboard life. Communication with loved ones, often a vital source of comfort, was the only thread connecting them to the world they longed to return to.

The pandemic stripped away the already fragile support systems that seafarers relied on. Medical care became difficult to access because ports restricted shore access. Mental health support and recreational facilities vanished as ships became isolated islands on the ocean. The absence of physical human connection and the fear of contracting the virus onboard heightened feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and helplessness. Reports of depression and fatigue among seafarers surged as they struggled with uncertainty about their future. Many faced mounting fears about their job security, finances, and the wellbeing of their families back home. These fears were compounded by a sense that their sacrifices were invisible, that their plight was forgotten by the very systems they helped sustain.

Working conditions worsened as crew members faced increased workloads to keep shipping operations running smoothly despite reduced manpower. Fatigue and stress mounted, exacerbated by the constant risk of infection in confined spaces and the pressure to maintain schedules in the face of widespread disruptions. The extended contracts meant many seafarers missed important family events, anniversaries, and even the births or deaths of loved ones, deepening their sense of loss and disconnection.

⁵ International Chamber of Shipping, *Shipping and World Trade*, <https://www.ics-shipping.org/shipping-facts/shipping-and-world-trade/>

Additionally, the pandemic saw a rise in shipboard bullying and harassment. In the close quarters of a ship, tensions naturally rise, but the prolonged periods of isolation and stress intensified conflicts. Without access to shore-based support or intervention, many seafarers found themselves trapped in hostile environments. Training and refresher courses essential for career development and safety were halted, leaving crews without the opportunity to upgrade their skills or receive guidance on coping mechanisms. This stagnation created further frustration and anxiety among seafarers, who felt professionally and personally stuck.

The legal frameworks designed to protect seafarers, such as the Maritime Labour Convention, faced unprecedented challenges during this crisis. Some flag states issued temporary exemptions on maximum service periods to ease crew changes, but these were piecemeal and inconsistent across nations.⁶ The lack of standardized international protocols left many seafarers navigating a patchwork of conflicting rules, adding to their confusion and distress.⁷ The pandemic highlighted glaring gaps in global governance for seafarers' welfare, underscoring the urgent need for clearer, unified policies.

Despite these hardships, seafarers showed remarkable resilience and dedication. They kept the supply chains moving, ensuring that medical supplies, food, fuel, and other essentials reached people worldwide during a time of dire need. Their commitment went largely unrecognized, overshadowed by the immediate health crisis on land. Yet, they remained the silent heroes of the pandemic, working in the background to keep the world's economy afloat.

This crisis exposed a harsh truth: seafarers, the lifeblood of global trade, have long been undervalued and underserved. Their rights, welfare, and mental health have often been sidelined in favor of commercial interests. The pandemic, while devastating, also brought attention to their plight and ignited calls for reforms.

Moving forward, there is a collective responsibility among governments, shipping companies, and international bodies to better protect seafarers. Clear, harmonized rules for crew changes

⁶ BIMCO, *Contractual Implications of COVID-19 on Crew Changes and Port Restrictions*, <https://www.bimco.org/insights-and-information/contracts/20211101-contractual-implications-of-covid-19-on-crew-changes-and-port-restrictions>

⁷ Michael F. Sturley, *The Law of the Sea and the Protection of Seafarers: International and Comparative Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 182–185 (discussing how inconsistent international regulations contribute to confusion and hardship for seafarers).

must be established to prevent future situations where workers are stranded without support. Mental health services and medical access should be prioritized, recognizing the unique challenges of life at sea. Investment in technology can ease some burdens, but it cannot replace the human element. Compassion, empathy, and respect must guide all efforts to safeguard the wellbeing of those who spend months away from home to keep the world connected.

Seafarers deserve not only fair wages and safe working conditions but also dignity and recognition. The pandemic taught us that the world cannot function without their labour. As we rebuild and prepare for future global challenges, let us ensure their voices are heard and their needs met. They have carried us through one of the most turbulent times in recent history—now it is our turn to carry them.

CONSEQUENCES DEALT BY SHIPPING INDUSTRY

The shipping industry suffers a lot due to the uncertainties in supply chains and lower global trade. Taking port closures into consideration, this has led to reduced port productivity as the ports were forced to cease down its activities on the grounds of Covid -19 measures. Maritime vessels were put on a ban and were not allowed to reach their destination ports.⁸ As the shipping agencies were compelled to meet the covid protocols, the transportation was delayed which led to less demand and supply of goods. The imports and exports went down significantly caused by less demand for cargos which paved the way for less consumption and production. The countries such as Latin America, North America, and North Africa continued to extend the lockdowns which concerns about the debt and foreign currency shortage⁹. By the virtue of fewer cargos, the shipping companies were not able to handle the finances, as a result, small shipping companies turned to be bankrupt. Disputes between charters and owners arose following the loss of money and time.¹⁰ Charters hire vessels from the owners for a fixed period and fixed costs and this was negated via force majeure¹¹. The regulations in the port obstructed the vessels to reach their destination which forced them to remain on territorial waters.¹² This caused additional costs due to overriding of time because of which led to disputes between

⁸ David J. Attard, *The Law of the Sea: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 95 (noting that during the COVID-19 pandemic, many maritime vessels faced port entry restrictions and bans).

⁹ World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects, January 2021: Latin America and the Caribbean*, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/34509> (discussing extended lockdowns and economic concerns including debt and foreign currency shortages in Latin America, North America, and North Africa).

¹⁰ Basil S. Markesinis & Hannes Unberath, *The Law of Shipowners' Liability*, 3rd ed., Informa Law, 2018, pp. 210–215

¹¹ Nicholas J. Brown, *Charterparties: Law and Practice*, 4th ed., Informa Law, 2020, pp. 145–150

¹² Dr. Xiangming Fang, *Port Management and Operations*, Routledge, 2021, pp. 78–80

charters and owners in laytime settlement. The ports have got into a vulnerable stage attributable to fleet adjustments including blank sailing

WAY FORWARD

The Covid 19 pandemic gave rise to long term structural changes in the marine and shipping sector which could also be the relief and solutions in the upcoming future.

- 1) The common work from home strategy was implemented for the shipping companies even though it bears certain limitations relating to coordination and commitment.
- 2) Introduction of robotics on board and facilitation of digitalized version were also equipped and dealt out. This also led to tough competitions among companies, intensified merger, and acquisitions as well.
- 3) The demand for digitalized professionals went on a high and escalation of digital logistics and smart ports need to implement widely.
- 4) It has become the life and death necessity to bring forth better risk management strategies to confront future disruptions and troubles.

The implications of Corona virus can be long lasting but the necessities such as the crew change of seafarers must be taken care of and the issues which requires the immediate attention should be guided. The safety and maintenance should never be compromised. The shippers and port are trying to work in land, but it has been difficult for them to change and adapt. Effective technological improvements must be fostered for the shipping companies to find an easier way to business. The adequate job opportunities must be providing for the seamen as well as the shipping agents in case of layoff. The new business policies and government rules and regulations should help the life blood of global trade for its speedy recovery soon. The backbone of international trade must be brought to its earlier, and finer state so that the world is saved, and sustainable development promoted for a better future.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a stark reminder that even the most resilient global systems can be brought to a grinding halt. Shipping, the silent workhorse of the world economy, bore the brunt of the storm. From stranded seafarers grappling with isolation and mental fatigue to idle vessels anchored off closed ports, the disruptions were not just economic—they were deeply human.

As we move forward, it is imperative to treat the people at the helm—our seafarers—with empathy and priority. The pandemic may have exposed the industry's vulnerabilities, but it also

gave us the clarity to chart a better course. Resilience is no longer just about fuel capacity or cargo size; it is about foresight, digital transformation, robust policies, and most importantly, humane treatment of those who keep our trade routes alive.

A future-proof shipping industry must be inclusive, adaptive, and compassionate. The seas may never be entirely calm, but with the right vision and collaborative action, we can ensure that the global lifelines stay afloat—steadily, safely, and sustainably.

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