

AN OPEN LETTER TO ALL GOVERNMENTS, INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND THE MARITIME INDUSTRY

A call from Shipmasters Global Threats, Trends and Risks to Shipping and its Seafarers

The International Federation of Shipmasters' Associations (IFSMA) [see: www.ifsma.org] was established in 1974 to uphold International Standards of Professional Competence for Shipmasters and Seafarers. It is a federation with a policy to ensure Safe Operational Practices, Preservation from Human Injury, Protection of the Marine Environment and Safety of Life and Property at Sea.

In 1975, IFSMA was granted Consultative Status as a non-governmental, apolitical organisation at the International Maritime Organization (IMO) which enables it to represent the views and protect the interests of the world's serving Shipmasters unfettered and unfiltered by others.

Geopolitical Instability and Its Impact on Shipping

The current geopolitical climate is marked by heightened regional conflicts and tensions in critical maritime areas. Conflicts in the Middle East, Ukraine, and other regions have led to a surge in attacks on merchant vessels by State and non-State actors using conventional and hybrid means. This has led to the closure or restriction of strategic sea lanes, such as the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz, causing severe disruptions to global logistics, rerouting of maritime traffic, and increased operational risks. While seafarers play an essential role in supporting global trade, they are increasingly being used as pawns within these conflicts.

Resurgence of Piracy and Threats from Non-State Actors

After years of decline, piracy has re-emerged as a serious threat. In 2024, vessel hijackings were again reported off the coast of Somalia. Simultaneously, terrorist and politically motivated groups are increasingly using advanced technologies, including UAVs and naval mines, making the maritime domain ever more unpredictable and dangerous.

Economic Protectionism and Sanctions

Rising protectionism, along with unilateral sanctions and trade restrictions, has resulted in the reconfiguration of global trade routes and maritime uncertainty, increasing pressure on shipmasters navigating restricted or sensitive regions with higher risks of vessel arrests and crew detentions on allegations of sanction violations, often without due legal process or sufficient evidence.

Criminalisation of Shipmasters and Crew

There is a growing trend of criminalising the actions of shipmasters and senior officers in connection with sanctioned regimes or incidents beyond their control. This has led to a rise in vessel arrests and subsequent detentions of crew and their criminal prosecution, including holding masters criminally liable for issues such as smuggling or cargo violations of which they had no knowledge. This often leads to extended detentions without trial or a charge clearly violating international legal standards and the recently agreed IMO/ILO guidelines on fair treatment of seafarers suspected of committing a crime. Measures to fight against criminalisation are often debated, but very little is seen to make any impact.

Violation of Labour Rights and Mounting Pressure on Shipmasters

It has been noted that shipmasters are increasingly working under high levels of stress, facing threats of detention, prosecution, and financial penalties. They are often subject to undue pressure from port authorities, shipping and management companies, charterers and other stakeholders. These conditions severely impact decision-making and crew welfare endangering maritime safety.

Concern at IFSMA

IFSMA expresses serious concern about the escalating geopolitical tensions, increasing threats to global maritime security, and the disturbing trend of the criminalisation of maritime professionals and violations of their fundamental rights. Shipmasters are on the frontline of these challenges, often required to make rapid decisions in high-risk and pressured environments that endanger not only their vessels and cargo, but also the lives of their crews. Seafarers play an essential role in supporting global trade, but they are increasingly being used as pawns within these conflicts. The COVID-19 pandemic clearly demonstrated that seafarers constitute a vital link in the global supply chain. In recognition of this fact, the IMO and ILO have formally designated seafarers as ‘key workers’.

Call to Governments and International Organizations

IFSMA therefore very strongly urges all Governments and International Organizations to ensure the protection of shipmasters and crews from arbitrary detention and criminalisation, commit to upholding human rights in maritime operations and establish transparent legal frameworks for port detentions and sanctions enforcement and in particular the IMO/ILO guidelines on fair treatment of seafarers suspected of committing a crime.

Call to Shipping Management Companies

IFSMA very strongly urges Shipping and Management Companies to provide training on sanctions-related risks and ensure legal assistance and institutional support to masters and seafarers suspected of committing a crime in accordance with the IMO/ILO guidelines on fair treatment of seafarers suspected of committing a crime.

Call to all maritime stakeholders

IFSMA very strongly urges all maritime stakeholders to promote information-sharing on high-risk areas and support international initiatives to end the criminalisation of maritime professions.

IFSMA remains committed to safeguarding the rights and safety of shipmasters and will continue to engage with key stakeholders across global shipping - including Governments, Intergovernmental and non-Governmental Organizations, National Authorities and Industry Partners to promote fair, safe, and just working conditions for maritime professionals.

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