

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE SEAFARER

*Manoranjan Srivastava, Commandant, Indian Coast Guard
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The growing appetite for energy and mineral resources by emerging economies has led to increasing quantities of goods being transported across the globe through International Shipping Lanes (ISLs). In order to cater for the growing requirements, logistic-waypoints and supply-chains, at the regional level as well as at the global one, have evolved, with seaborne being infused with technological advances, and improvement in efficiencies of port and port-management rising to take advantage of Industry 4.0 (or, as the port of Hamburg expresses it, 'Port 4.0'), to name just a few advancements. Shipping has thus retained its historical role as the “*umbilical cord*” connecting national economies to intercontinental seaborne trade, incorporating both, raw materials, and finished products, both of which are key ingredients for national prosperity.

Today, the international shipping industry is responsible for the carriage of around 90% of world trade. Nearly 50,000 merchant ships, manned by more than a million seafarers, sail along the world's trade routes and are the principal movers of international trade, transporting every kind of cargo.¹ These seafarers brave natural threats such as cyclones and manmade ones such as pirates and a wide array of maritime criminals, and spend many lonely days at sea. In 2010, the International Maritime Organization (IMO), designated June 25, as the “International Day of the Seafarer” to, first of all, promote the recognition that almost everything that we use in our daily lives has been directly or indirectly affected by seaborne transport;² and secondly, and even more importantly, to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of the seafarer to the world economy and civil society, as well as to draw global attention towards the risks and issues involved in their working atmosphere and lives, such as capricious and inclement weather, and a variety of manifestations of maritime crime, including armed robbery and piracy.³

The 25th of June 2020 marks the tenth anniversary of the “International Day for Seafarers”. It has been a regular practice by the IMO to designate a relevant theme relevant to the profession of seafarers, and accordingly, campaigns are organised worldwide to create and promote awareness, as also for necessary steps to be taken to address pertinent issues, relevant to contemporary times. For example, in 2019, the theme was “*I am on board with gender equality*”. This theme was chosen to highlight the fact that world of seafarers has a meagre representation of just 2% from women, out of which 94% are employed in the cruise industry alone. This theme was,

¹ International Chamber of Shipping, “Shipping and World Trade”, <https://www.ics-shipping.org/shipping-facts/shipping-and-world-trade>

² Ibid

³ World Maritime University, “Day of the Seafarer 2019”, <https://www.wmu.se/news/day-of-the-seafarer-2019>

in turn, supported by the World Maritime Day theme of “*Empowering Women in the Maritime Community*”. These themes were, therefore, not only aligned to Sustainable Development Goal Number 5 (SDG 5) of the UN, which focusses upon gender equality, but also sent a strong message through this male-dominated field.⁴

The IMO campaign for the International Day for Seafarers, 2020 is, *Seafarers are Key Workers*,⁵ and calls upon all member-states of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) to support and assist seafarers, especially during the present COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic has not only impacted the entire globe but has posed an array of challenges to the global shipping industry. Amongst these are difficulties in port-access, crew changeovers, and attendant uncertainties linked to travel restrictions, which limit the freedom of many seafarers to return to their families. The 2020 campaign also aims to highlight the seafarer’s frontline role, in these troubled ‘Covidian’ times, by ensuring the uninterrupted flow of critical goods such as food, medicines and medical-supplies. The Secretary-General of the IMO, Mr Kitack Lim, in his Seafarers Day Message, has squarely addressed the issue by affirming that “*Just like other key workers, seafarers are on the front line in this global fight. They deserve our thanks. But they also need — and deserve — quick and decisive humanitarian action from governments everywhere, not just during the pandemic, but at all times.*”⁶

This day is hugely significant for India as well, mainly due to the country’s very high dependence upon seaborne trade and also because India provides just under 10% (9.35% to be exact) of all global seafarers and ranks third in the list of the large seafarer-supplying nations.⁶ As the world embarks upon its collective transition to a Blue Economy, the seas will gain even greater prominence, and, as a result, the shipping industry will grow exponentially. Therefore, India must seize this opportunity and enhance its capability to provide skilled and professional seafarers, thereby adding teeth to its shipping industry.

The National Maritime Foundation (NMF), New Delhi, which is India’s premier autonomous maritime think-tank, recognises and acknowledges the relentless and untiring efforts of seafarers of the world and, on this tenth anniversary of the World Seafarers Day, extends its warm wishes to the entire seafaring community and, in particular, conveys its heartfelt thanks for the sterling services rendered by this community of bravehearts during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Commandant Manoranjan Srivastava is a serving officer of the Indian Coast Guard and is presently a Research Fellow at the National Maritime Foundation. The views expressed are the author’s and do not reflect the position or policies of the Indian Navy, the Indian Coast Guard, or the Government of India. He can be contacted on researchfellow6.nmf@gmail.com.

⁴ International Maritime Organisation, “Day of the Seafarer 2020”, <http://www.imo.org/en/About/Events/dayoftheseafarer/Pages/Day-of-the-Seafarer-2020.aspx>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Director General of Shipping, “Our Strength”, <https://www.dgshipping.gov.in/Content/OurStrength.aspx>