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Circular Letter No.4224  
19 March 2020

To: All IMO Members  
United Nations and specialized agencies  
Intergovernmental organizations  
Non-governmental organizations in consultative status

Subject: **Communication from the Secretary-General**

The spread of the coronavirus has placed the entire world in an unprecedented situation. To slow the spread of the disease and mitigate its impacts, travel is being curtailed and borders are being closed. Transport hubs are being affected. Ports are being closed and ships denied entry.

In these difficult times, the ability for shipping services and seafarers to deliver vital goods, including medical supplies and foodstuffs, will be central to responding to, and eventually overcoming, this pandemic.

It is, therefore, crucially important that the flow of commerce by sea should not be unnecessarily disrupted. At the same time, the safety of life at sea and protection of the marine environment must also remain paramount.

One of the goals of IMO, as stated in its Convention, is to ensure availability of shipping services to the commerce of the world, for the benefit of humanity. I urge all IMO Member States to bear this in mind when framing their policy decisions with regard to the coronavirus. Defeating the coronavirus must be the first priority, but global trade, in a safe, secure and environmentally friendly manner must be able to continue, too.

We must also remember the hundreds of thousands of seafarers on ships. They are, unwittingly, on the front line of this global calamity. Their professionalism ensures that the goods we all need are delivered – safely and with minimal impact on our precious environment. These are people, usually far from home and family. Their own health and welfare is as important as that of anyone else.

Again, I urge a practical and pragmatic approach, in these unusual times, to issues like crew changeovers, resupply, repairs, survey and certification and licensing of seafarers.

Together with our industry partners and colleagues in the World Health Organization, IMO has been developing and issuing practical advice and guidance on a variety of technical and operational matters related to the coronavirus. You can find this on our website, and we will be updating this as appropriate as the situation develops.

I will personally be initiating a series of meetings and consultations with leaders from shipping, ports and other key related sectors so that we can all better understand the issues being faced and develop sensible, practical and unified solutions.

I have spoken many times of our "voyage together". Never has the spirit of those words been more important than it is now.

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