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Circular Letter No.4204/Add.38
25 March 2021

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

Subject: **Coronavirus (COVID-19) – Joint Statement calling on all Governments to prioritize COVID-19 vaccination for seafarers and aircrew**

The Secretary-General of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the Director-General of the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Secretary-General of the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Director-General of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) jointly issue the attached statement to urge all United Nations Member States to prioritize seafarers and aircrew in their national COVID-19 vaccination programmes, to protect them through vaccination as soon as possible and to facilitate their safe movement across borders.

Member States are strongly encouraged to take urgent action to address this issue and bring the contents of this circular letter to the attention of the competent health, immigration, border control and maritime authorities, at both national and local levels; as well as all other parties concerned, in particular ports and airports.

ANNEX**Joint Statement on prioritization of COVID-19 vaccination for seafarers and aircrew
25 March 2021**

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has triggered devastating consequences for human life and the global economy. Maritime and air transport are two essential activities that underpin global trade and mobility and are key to a sustainable socio-economic recovery.

More than 80% of global trade by volume is moved by maritime transport. The global economy depends on the world's 2 million seafarers who operate the global fleet of merchant ships. Seafarers have been severely impacted by the travel restrictions imposed during the pandemic. As of January 2021, it is estimated that some 400,000 seafarers are stranded on board commercial vessels, long past the expiry of their contracts and unable to be repatriated. A similar number of seafarers urgently need to join ships to replace them.

Passenger air transport carried about 5.7 billion passengers in 2019 while airfreight represents 35% of the value of goods shipped in all modes combined. The total number of licensed aviation professionals, which include pilots, air traffic controllers and licensed maintenance technicians, was 887,000 in 2019, according to ICAO personnel statistics. Application of stringent public health rules to air crew, including quarantine, has resulted in hindered connectivity, operational complexity and significant cost.

Maritime and air transport rely on seafarers and aircrew. They are key workers required to travel across borders at all times, which may result in the need for them to present proof of a COVID-19 vaccination as a condition for entry in some countries. This is despite WHO recommendation that, at the present time, countries should not introduce requirements of proof of vaccination for international travel as a condition of entry, as there are still critical unknowns regarding the efficacy of vaccination in reducing transmission and limited availability of vaccines¹. For shipping and air transport to continue to operate safely, the safe cross border movement of seafarers and aircrew must be facilitated. We reiterate our call upon countries that have not done so to designate seafarers and aircrew as key workers.

¹ Statement on the sixth meeting of the International Health Regulations (2005) Emergency Committee regarding the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic: [https://www.who.int/news/item/15-01-2021-statement-on-the-sixth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-\(2005\)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-19\)-pandemic](https://www.who.int/news/item/15-01-2021-statement-on-the-sixth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-(2005)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-19)-pandemic)

With this statement, our organizations also call on governments to prioritize seafarers and aircrew in their national COVID-19 vaccination programmes, together with other essential workers, in accordance with the advice from the WHO SAGE Roadmap for prioritizing the use of COVID-19 vaccines in the context of limited supply published in November 2020². Seafarers and aircrew need to be protected through vaccination as soon as possible, to facilitate their safe movement across borders. We also call on governments to identify and prepare for the challenges of COVID-19 vaccination of seafarers and aircrew, particularly for seafarers spending long periods of time away from their home country.

Our organizations fully support the timely development of an international harmonized framework for vaccination certificates, to facilitate international travel for seafarers and aircrew.

In December 2020, WHO established a Smart Vaccination Certificate working group to ensure that digitalized versions of vaccine certificates are interoperable³, and the UN Crisis Management Team for COVID-19, under the leadership of WHO, recognized that all countries should consider seafarers and aircrew, who are required to travel across borders during the pandemic, for essential allocation of vaccines.

We invite governments and other stakeholders to bring the contents of this joint statement to the attention of the competent authorities and all parties concerned.



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² WHO SAGE Roadmap For Prioritizing Uses Of COVID-19 Vaccines In The Context Of Limited Supply: <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/who-sage-roadmap-for-prioritizing-uses-of-covid-19-vaccines-in-the-context-of-limited-supply>

³ WHO Smart Vaccination Certificate Working Group: <https://www.who.int/groups/smart-vaccination-certificate-working-group>