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Circular Letter No.4204/Add.29
4 September 2020

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

Subject: **Coronavirus (COVID 19) – Communication from the Secretary-General regarding the crew change crisis**

Numerous forums around the world have recognized the importance of shipping in keeping the global supply chain open in order to respond to and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. A crucial component in keeping ships moving is the ability of shipowners and operators to safely conduct crew changes on ships.

Nearly 6 months have passed since COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, and the numerous restrictions and obstacles that prevent crew changes have created a humanitarian crisis at sea. According to estimates from the International Chamber of Shipping and the International Transport Workers Federation, more than 300,000 seafarers and marine personnel remain on board commercial vessels, unable to be repatriated and past the expiry of their contracts. In some cases, seafarers have been aboard their ships for more than 17 months, added to the challenges faced to get proper access to medical care and shore leave. A similar number of seafarers have been prevented from joining ships to change crews, creating a situation where they are unable to work. Despite these challenges, the seafarers on board ships have continued working, and the essential services seafarers have provided to the world have been nothing short of heroic.

The Organization has provided comprehensive guidance and protocols to the shipping industry and to Member Governments, through the Circular Letter No.4204 series, to allow crew changes to occur safely and securely. In addition, other United Nations agencies have highlighted the urgency of the matter, including in statements from the United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres. While significant progress has been made by many countries in allowing for crew changes for all seafarers, the rate of progress is not keeping pace with the backlog of ships requiring crew changes.

Seafarers cannot remain at sea indefinitely. In addition to the humanitarian crisis that has been caused by keeping seafarers effectively trapped on their vessels, the safety issues that arise from requiring overly fatigued and mentally exhausted seafarers to continue operating vessels

