

CARRYING WORLD TRADE, CARRYING THE RISKS: SEAFARER WELFARE MUST MOVE FROM APPRECIATION TO PROTECTION –

--By Priyatham Sanjeeva Reddy Ramidi

Every year, the maritime community thanks seafarers for keeping world trade moving. In 2026, the International Maritime Organization has chosen a more uncomfortable message for the Day of the Seafarer: “Carrying world trade. Carrying the risks.”

The theme is timely. Seafarers do not only carry cargo. They absorb risks created by geopolitical conflict, commercial pressure, long contracts, disrupted crew changes and decisions made far from the ship. They may sail through areas affected by military tension without having any influence over the political events around them. They may face uncertainty over port access, repatriation and family contact while the cargo continues to move.

From Appreciation to Practical Protection

Appreciation has value, but appreciation alone does not protect anyone. The industry now needs to convert recognition into practical safeguards.

Clear Information Before Exposure

The first requirement is honest risk communication. Before joining a vessel or entering a high-risk area, seafarers should receive clear information about the route, security situation, insurance arrangements, additional compensation, communications plan and procedures for refusal or repatriation. A generic security circular is not enough. Crew members need information they can understand and use.

The second requirement is genuine consultation. Ships may be rerouted or instructed to continue trading as conditions change. The people exposed to those conditions should not be the last to know. Masters and crew need a defined channel for raising concerns without fear that doing so will damage their careers.

The Impact on Indian Seafarers and Families

This is especially important for India, one of the world’s major suppliers of maritime professionals. Indian seafarers serve across global fleets and often spend months away from their families. When a ship is detained, attacked, abandoned or trapped by conflict, the consequences extend to households and communities on shore. Welfare policy must therefore include family communication and assistance, not only support for the individual on board.

Companies should establish a family liaison process for serious incidents. One trained contact should provide verified updates, explain what the company is doing

and prevent relatives from being forced to rely on social media rumors. Even when operational information is limited, regular communication reduces fear.

Fatigue: The Everyday Risk

Fatigue is another risk that is often less visible than conflict but more common. Tight schedules, reduced manning and administrative workload can erode rest. Records may show compliance while the crew experiences repeated interruptions. Welfare cannot be measured only through paperwork. Companies should examine actual work patterns, callouts, port intensity and the cumulative effects of short sea passages.

Technology can help, but it can also add pressure. Digital reporting, remote inspections and continuous connectivity may reduce some tasks while creating new expectations for immediate response. Shore teams should review whether every report, meeting and data request is operationally necessary. Removing low-value administrative work is a direct welfare intervention because it returns time to rest, maintenance and professional judgment.

Making Welfare Support Trustworthy

Mental-health support must also be practical. A helpline is useful only when seafarers trust confidentiality, can access it across time zones and believe that seeking help will not affect future employment. Managers and senior officers need training to recognize distress and respond respectfully. Peer-support networks can be particularly valuable because they reduce the barrier between the person needing help and formal services.

Abandonment and Recruitment Protection

Abandonment remains one of the clearest tests of the industry's commitment. When wages are unpaid, provisions are limited or repatriation is delayed, responsibility can become fragmented among owners, managers, insurers, flag states and port states. The seafarer experiences the system as a single failure. Faster coordination and enforcement are essential.

Recruitment practices also matter. No seafarer should begin a career burdened by illegal placement fees or deceptive promises. Transparent contracts verified recruiters and accessible complaint mechanisms are basic protections. Maritime education institutions can support young seafarers by teaching not only technical subjects but also employment rights and methods for verifying offers.

The 2026 theme should encourage companies to publish measurable welfare commitments. These might include maximum response times for family communication, payment reliability, repatriation performance, shore-leave access, internet availability and closure of reported welfare cases. What is measured can be

managed, provided the data reflects real experience rather than a compliance exercise.

What Ports and Governments Must Do

Ports have a role as well. Shore leave, medical access, transport and seafarer-center services can make a major difference during short port calls. Security requirements should be implemented without treating legitimate shore access as an inconvenience. Port welfare committees can help coordinate practical support among authorities, agents, unions, charities and ship operators.

Governments must continue to uphold international labor standards and protect seafarers from becoming pawns in geopolitical disputes. Diplomatic coordination is often essential when crews are detained or caught in conflict. National administrations should maintain current emergency contact systems and cooperate with industry before a crisis, not only after one begins.

The wider public also needs to understand the human infrastructure behind trade. Consumers see products on shelves but rarely see the people who moved them across oceans. Greater awareness can strengthen political support for seafarer protection and remind cargo interests that low transport cost should not depend on hidden human risk.

“Carrying world trade. Carrying the risks” should not become another slogan that disappears after 25 June. It should be used as a management question throughout the year: Which risks are crews carrying because shore organizations have failed to remove, reduce or share them?

A safer and fairer maritime industry will still require courage and professionalism at sea. But it should never treat exposure, uncertainty and silence as normal conditions of employment. The most meaningful tribute to seafarers is not praise. It is protection that can be felt on board and trusted by families at home.

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