

Day of the seafarers: “FAIR FUTURE FOR SEAFARERS”

Sub-topic: SAMSA Support to Seafarers during COVID-19

Sibusiso Rantsoabe:
Manager OHS and Maritime Welfare
South African Maritime Safety Authority

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1. Greetings and acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the Minister of Transport, Honourable Fikile Mbalula, and the Deputy Minister of Transport Ms Dikeledi Magadzi for gracing us with their presence, I would also like to recognise the following people and groups:

- a. Our principals from the Department of Transport Maritime Branch led by Acting DDG, Mr Mthunzi Madiya
- b. SAMSA board under the leadership of Ms Nthate Minyuku, the ACEO Ms Tsepiso-Taoana-Mashiloane her executives
- c. Fellow Panel members
- d. Men of the cloth who provide such honourable service to our seafarers in the ports.
- e. The audience here today
- f. Last but definitely not least our special guests, the seafarers.

When COVID-19 struck, we found ourselves locked in various places of habitation, as a result of the strict lockdown regime.

My colleague Mashudu from the Department of Transport (DoT) in emphasising the importance of our seafarers posted these words on Facebook:

"Our invisible frontline personnel, essential workers weathering the storms of Seven Seas, Gulfs, Bays and all water channels to facilitate global trade"

Ships continued to carry globally traded goods during all levels of lockdown. When I say ships remember they are not autonomous yet but have people that navigate them, keeping them on course and also brave men and women braving the often-harsh conditions in the engine rooms ensuring smooth sailing.

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Harbours and ports remained open as well to ensure that we receive key and essential goods such as food, medicine, medical equipment, mobile phones etc. It is unfortunate that despite the hard work and bravery displayed by our seafarers, the world failed to recognise them as key or essential workers.

The seafarers globally were saying “We seem to like and appreciate key and essential items that they brought us, we even called shipping essential service, yet we were slow in declaring them as essential/key workers, how does that work?” This was a question from seafarers around the world. During various lockdown regimes around the world seafarers continued to struggle to disembark vessels and head home at the end of their contracts. Six months contracts turned to 12 months and above. IMO and ILO intervened, and South Africa were one of the first group of countries that signed the declaration that sort to declare seafarers as key workers.

Going back to my topic for today. In March 2020 as various lockdown regimes were being implemented around the world. As the count down began seafarers found themselves in a race against time. They were locked in various jurisdictions which were not allowing any crew changes or disembarkations. Some seafarers found themselves stuck in locked airports around the world as they failed to beat the lockdown countdown.

Many others remained on-board not knowing when next will they see their loved ones. We were all entering uncharted waters. SAMSA started receiving SOS messages from all corners of the world. We also followed social media to scan for posts from stranded seafarers. South Africa also banned international commercial flights which was absolutely necessary at the time.

I usually say seafarers operate virtually under the radar (not by fault of their own). The very nature of recruitment and the work is international.

Unlike with South African expats where it is easy to get information on the number of South Africans who are, for example, based in a particular country. Expats would generally let the local SA Foreign Mission know that they are in the country. With seafarers it is difficult to get such data as they are always in transit and never in one country.

This also made it difficult to understand the magnitude of the problem we were facing and also the amount of resources required to intervene. We started receiving individual requests for assistance with repatriation. I recall one of the first cases whereby a seafarer working on a private yacht was stuck in Mexico not sure of his next move. We advised him to fly to Washington and also directed him to our mission in Washington DC who were organising a repatriation flight at the time. He made it home.

I just want to make this clear in our current legal regime, repatriation is the competency of the NATJOINTS. SAMSA’s role was from a welfare angle and to point the seafarers in the right direction. We were not organising repatriation flights.

Our efforts were never going to be enough due to the magnitude of the problem. However, with the support from the Department of Transport and the colleagues at the Department of International Relations and Cooperation we managed to ensure that hundreds (100s) of

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seafarers were pointed to the right direction and made it home safely. What did SAMSA exactly do?

- We started compiling a list of available repatriation flights departing from various cities across the world.
- Through our Corporate Affairs Executive Mr September who was on 24hour call, we started reaching out to SA Foreign missions around the world alerting them of the presence of seafarers in their territory and ensured that seafarers were also prioritized for repatriations. Earlier, when repatriation started, there was this perception that said they were better off since some were actually locked in floating hotels. This was not a government position. Between SAMSA and DoT, we began engaging our counterparts about the precarious positions that the seafarers were working under.
- SA foreign missions abroad started including seafarers in repatriation flights in numbers.
- We made contacts with known employers of South African seafarers and provided guidance on how they can bring South Africans home. The help was generally well received.
- We gave them guidelines that were set out by the NATJOINTS on how to get yourself back home i.e. registering with the local SA Foreign Mission, gave them information of available or pending repatriation flights and routes that were “South Africa friendly” etc.
- This was a game changer as instead of dealing with individual cases we started dealing with groups.
- Crewing companies, ship owners etc started knocking at our door asking for assistance in bringing South Africans home. Our own companies and those with a big presence in South Africa were exemplary in this as they left no stones unturned in order to ensure that our seafarers are able to head home.
- We also connected employers of seafarers and encourage them to pool resources i.e. chartered flights.
- At some point we were dealing with airline charterers who were seeking landing rights in South Africa. Of course, SAMSA is not the competent Authority, however being in the same stable as our aviation counter parts, we were able to direct them accordingly.
- The important thing during this process was to ensure that our seafarers get back home, and we also facilitated that they retain their jobs. Remember we have no jurisdiction over those vessels, however through diplomacy we managed to forge relationships with the companies.
- We also found friends of seafarers raising the alarm in many social media platforms. One of these groups was a group called SA seafarers, started by a parent of a seafarer, it continues today as a WhatsApp group and also has a Facebook page. They lobbied strongly for repatriation of South African seafarers. We formed a collaboration with them as we had similar objectives and we shared as much information as much as possible within the perimeters of what government can and cannot share and had a mutually beneficial relationship. Our relationship afforded us access to seafarers we would not have known about. In turn together we made sure hundreds of seafarers headed home. I hope Ms Talana Davies Meiklejohn is tuned in as she has done a wonderful job.

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Whilst we were busy with humanitarian crisis unfolding abroad another one was unfolding right on our doorsteps. In the beginning of our lockdown crew changes were not allowed and later we got to a stage where only South Africans were allowed for crew changes. SAMSA was receiving many distress calls from seafarers stuck on ships in our waters. We also had to deal with a lot of labour issues, some related to repatriation and some being contractual issues where companies were not paying salaries on time blaming it all on Covid-19.

I cannot over emphasise the importance of a good working relationship between SAMSA, DoT and the industry. It was also through this collaboration that we managed to assist many distressed non-South African seafarers. We also found an opportunity to ensure that international crew were able to disembark at our ports and head home via repatriation flights. They were replaced by South Africans, as non-South Africans seafarers were not allowed in South Africa at that stage. This arrangement indirectly created much needed employment for our seafarers and at the same highlighted the skills shortages in the sector.

South Africa was one of the first countries to ease crew change restrictions even though we were using unorthodox methods, however many international seafarers were repatriated via South Africa. It was not the best route, however this arrangement saw hundreds non-South African seafarers being repatriated via South Africa through a process that was led by a friend of the seafarers Ms Mashudu Nephumbada at DoT. We offered advice to the companies on repatriation flights and health requirements to assist them in repatriating their crew out of South African ports. I think as South Africa we never publicised this as most people in the maritime world are not aware of this initiative. SAMSA was receiving a number of requests and directing them to DoT who in turn processed the documents with the relevant department in a smooth process.

The distress calls kept coming mainly through our Port offices with cries for help from fatigued seafarers on vessels transiting our waters.

When we thought everything has settled, the sea started calling:

- We started receiving enquiries from seafarers who have been offered contracts abroad but were unable to leave South Africa as there were no commercial international flights.
- We started looking at outbound repatriation flights that were in South Africa to collect mostly European nationals.
- Employers of South Africans also started contacting us looking for ways of getting the seafarers out of South Africa.
- SAMSA and DoT continued to lobby on behalf of the seafarers. In the end seafarers were allowed on these outbound repatriation flights so they could take up employment overseas. We continued offering advise on how to get out of South Africa when there were no international commercial flights.

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Way forward

SAMSA has always had an interest in seafarer welfare however the work was not centralized. The work is now centralized under the OHS & Maritime welfare unit. We are lucky that all levels of management are occupied by people who are passionate about seafarer welfare starting at the top with our ACEO.

The services offered by SAMSA to seafarers are divided in two i.e. South African seafarers and international seafarers.

1. International seafarers (when in South African waters)

- We continue to work with other role players with interest in seafarer welfare such as the Mission of Seafarers. We have spent many hours on vessels with for an example Rev. Thami Tembe in Durban attending to issues affecting seafarer welfare. We also work with other men of the cloth in various ports like Mark Classen in Richards Bay.
- We participate in Welfare Committees together with other role players such as ship owners/operators' representatives, Mission to Seafarers, TNPA etc.
- We also intervene on labour issues within the ports.

2. South African seafarer

- We have put together a seafarer welfare programme which we will formally introduce in due course. We need to complete consultations with some stakeholders. Some elements are already in place such as the help desk that can be reached via the email welfare@samsa.org.za
- The aim is to support our seafarers whilst at sea and to assist them as much as we can in fulfilling their career ambitions.
- As we are aware most organisations suffered financial setbacks in the last 14 months or so. SAMSA was also not spared, so some of the features of our programme will not be available immediately. We will have to implement the programme in stages. The highlights include:
 - A proposed page for seafarer welfare on our website,
 - Mentorship for cadets,
 - Support for women at sea,
 - Mental health support (walk in and online)
- Some of the services are already on offer through our Welfare Officer Nolundi Dubase. Our fishers in the Western Cape are taking advantage of the walk-in service. She has also been dealing with many cases of abuse against our female seafarers which is unfortunate.
- As highlighted during last year's event, we need to firm up support when it comes to mental health issues which include counselling.

In order to avoid duplication some of the areas we will have to collaborate with other stakeholders with common interest hence the consultation that will take place. You

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may find that competency for some of the areas lies somewhere else and we will be happy to collaborate to ensure that our seafarers are given the best possible support.

Conclusion

Firstly, I would like to thank our counterpart in Singapore the MPA who have always responded kindly when we need them to assist South Africans in distress. Please pass our gratitude Mr Aun Aun Cheah. They have been exemplary to all of us in the way they facilitated crew changes.

Lastly, I call upon everyone with an interest in seafarer welfare to work together. It is only through our joint efforts that we can realise a fair future for seafarers.

Thank you



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