



SEMAPHORE

Newsletter of the Maritime Law

Association of Australia and New Zealand



Kiribati Seafarers' Repatriation Ends Two-Year Campaign

May 9 saw six final seafarers touch down in the capital city of Tarawa, marking the end of a two-year campaign to repatriate about 600 Republic of Kiribati seafarers stranded overseas for varying lengths of time during the course of the pandemic.

An international coalition of employers, unions and non-governmental organisations came together to navigate “global travel restrictions and shifting COVID protocols” to resolve the Kiribati seafarers’ plight.

Convened by the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS), this partnership included:

- the International Transport Workers Federation
- South Pacific Marine Services
- Hamburg Süd
- Reederei Leonhard & Blumberg
- the International Labour Organization
- the International Maritime Organization (IMO)
- the Government of the Republic of Kiribati

It reportedly resulted in a progressive repatriation of the seafarers, which included:

- November 2020-April 2021 – 362 arriving via Fiji on various flights organised by the Kiribati Government
- November 2021 – 141 returning on a vessel hired by their employer
- beginning of 2022 – 73 arriving in groups of about ten on flights chartered by the Kiribati Government, employers and a religious organisation that supports seafarers
- May 2022 – remaining six seafarers repatriated on a flight from Fiji

Speaking at the completion of the repatriation, ICS secretary general Guy Platten said it was an “enormous relief” to finally see all of the seafarers returned home to their families.

“But it should never have been this difficult to get these seafarers home,” he stated.

“Governments must look at the hardship these keyworkers have faced and ask if it was really necessary?”

“We must learn from this lesson and make sure policy is put in place that means it never happens again.”

Added IMO Secretary-General Kitack Lim: “Seafarers need to be designated as key workers by all States, so that their travel and repatriation can be facilitated.”

According to an ICS media release, the difficulty repatriating the about 600 Kiribati seafarers was due, in part, to the “crew change crisis” that at its height left about 400,000 sailors stranded globally.

“During the pandemic, Kiribati operated a ‘zero-COVID’ policy, implementing total lockdowns to inbound travel,” it stated.

“Due to unequitable global distributions of PPE [personal protective equipment], COVID treatments and vaccines, the Government of Kiribati employed border closures as their main defence against the virus.”

However, the media release also noted that their employers began housing the Kiribati seafarers in Denmark and Germany in early 2021 as their contracts finished.

“Seafarers were provided room and board by their employer while awaiting a change in Kiribati’s border protocols. All the seafarers received their full dose of the vaccine if they had not been vaccinated while on contract.”

ICS Report

The ICS recently commissioned a report alongside the Hamburg Business University to evaluate the scope of the crisis and mitigation of a recurrence.

“The Perfect Storm” has reportedly defined the “necessary actions governments and international organisations must take to prevent another humanitarian crisis and disruptions to the global supply chain”.

The report is also understood to have singled out Australia, China, India and Japan as “responsible for the worst treatment of seafarers during the height of the pandemic”.

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