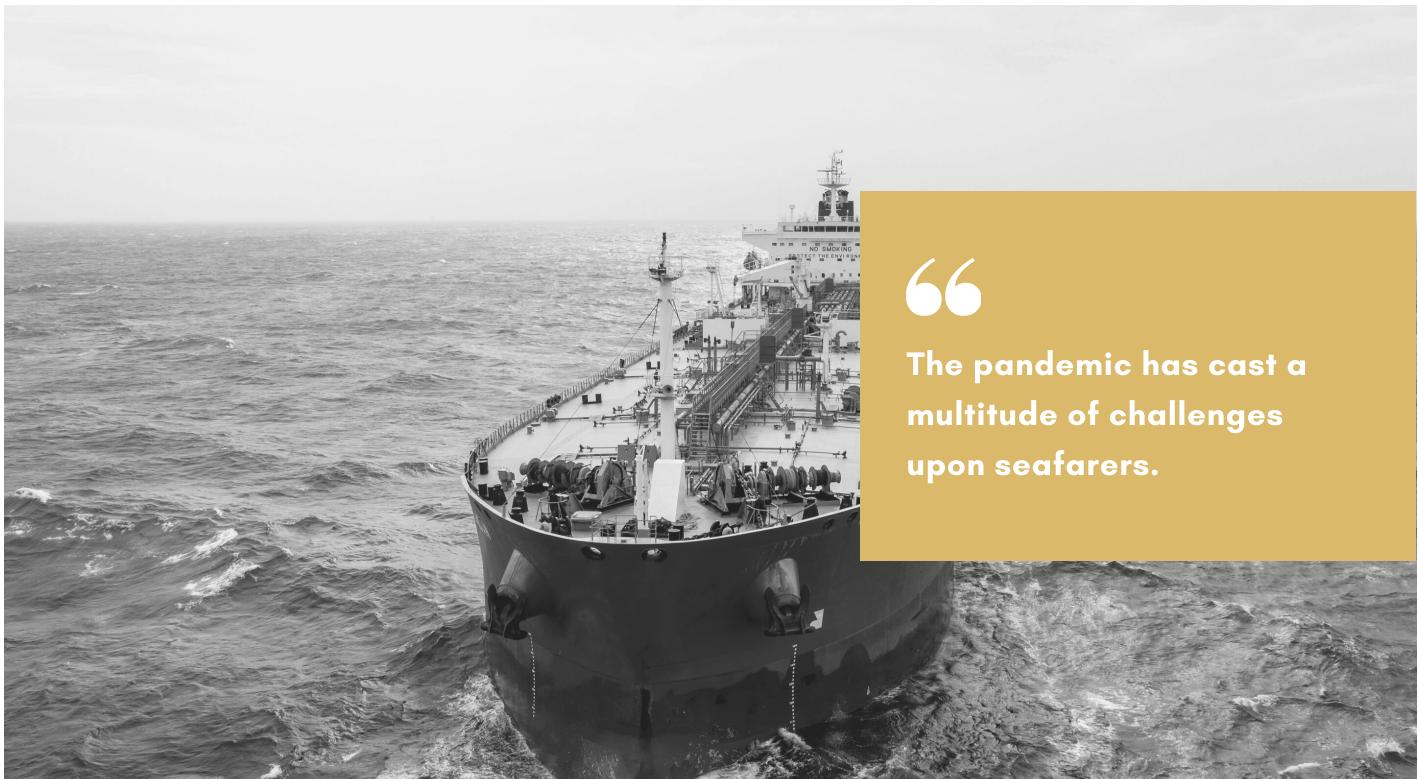


THE PANDEMIC & THE SEAFARERS



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The pandemic has cast a multitude of challenges upon seafarers.

BY CAPT. NANDA KISHORE MANDAL

Master / M.T.TAQAH

July 2021, Malacca Straits

At the time of writing this note the vessel was trading between the Persian Gulf and China. The vessel had predominantly Indian and Bangladeshi seafarers onboard.

It would be an understatement to say that shipping has been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. We, the seafarers aboard the M.T. TAQAH, are directly experiencing the pandemic's effects.

As a sailing Master currently out at sea, I write this article on behalf of all seafarers in an attempt to tell our story to those ashore.

I would like to highlight some key challenges and changes that we are experiencing.

Crew change complexity - a double-edged sword

Global travel and quarantine restrictions coupled with limited flight options has made it very difficult for shore management to provide smooth and safe crew changes. Aboard *Taqah* we have faced many difficulties with crew changes, particularly for Indian nationals.

This crew change challenge is a double-edged sword. While seagoing staff await relievers, other seafarers are in lockdown at their homes and unable to go out to sea, threatening their family's financial income, especially as many of them are the sole breadwinners.

Unvaccinated Crew

Onboard *Taqah* not a single crew member was vaccinated despite our numerous requests. The crew were also willing to pay for the vaccines themselves but they were denied this request. It seems that seafarers are the forgotten lot when it comes to vaccine access.



Grief onboard

Some crew members lost their loved ones due to the virus and even missed the funerals.

Ship management has tried to support crew members to the best of their abilities by offering relief measures such as financial and psychological support.

Measures taken to boost onboard morale

Ship management has provided free internet onboard and health campaigns to reduce stress and improve mental wellbeing.

Onboard management pays special attention to the mental well being of the crew. The task to keep all crewmembers happy and motivated in these challenging circumstances is by no means easy. All available means are deployed including creating games, organizing parties and encouraging physical exercise.



Multiple mental health stressors

Those sailing are facing prolonged contracts onboard without the option of shore leave. Unable to disembark for months at end, many seafarers become more vulnerable to depression. Worries about their loved ones at home coupled with a lack of proper rest may also result in fatigue, compromising the operational effectiveness and the safety of the vessel.

I have observed increased mental stress amongst my crew particularly when sailing to ports where there is a high risk of contracting the virus.

Changes in the port operations

Port operations have also changed dramatically. Here are some highlights:

- Now we must discharge cargo without any shore personal on board.
- Chinese ports have implemented different measures to protect crews on board and reduce COVID-19 transmission risk. Most communication between ship and shore is carried out via email, mobile phone, and other means.
- It was something remarkable and new in the tanker business that no surveyor comes on board for cargo calculations. Cargo measurements were taken by crew members and videos were sent as evidence.

While the procedures have changed with more remote monitoring, onboard personnel have quickly adapted and are able to carry smooth operations.

Seafarers' resilience is truly remarkable. I am able to be a witness to this firsthand.

Last but not the least, there is still a lot of hope that things will be all right.



Capt. Nanda Kishore Mandal at the bridge of VLCC M.T. Taqah.

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