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Coronavirus: Guidance on repatriating cruise ship passengers and protecting ship crews

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From cruise ship passengers to cargo vessel crew, many have found themselves stranded since the coronavirus pandemic first took hold.

The [guidelines](#) issued by the European Commission today support these individuals, providing recommendations on health, repatriation and travel arrangements. They also call on Member States to create a network of ports where crew changes can take place without delays.

Commissioner for Transport Adina Vălean said: “Seafarers are keeping the vital channels for our economy and supply chains open, as 75% of EU trade and 30% of all goods with the EU are transported by sea. The guidelines include sanitary advice, recommendations for crew changes, disembarking, and repatriation for seafarers and passengers. I am asking the Member States to designate ports where fast-track crew changes take place and recall that cruise operators have a responsibility to their customers and employees to bring everyone safely home”.

Crew changes, designated ports

Seafarers often work away from home for months at a time. Once their contract comes to an end – the case for around 100 000 seafarers every month – crew changes take place in a port. For many seafarers, the port of arrival/departure is outside of their home country, and many of those serving on EU-interest ships are non-EU

nationals.

EU Member States currently have different rules on crew changes in their ports. To ensure clarity for all involved, Member States should follow the Commission's [Guidance](#) on facilitating transit arrangements and the [Guidance on the implementation of green lanes](#). For non-EU nationals who need visas to disembark within the EU and who could not apply for them due to the current situation, Member States should grant these at the border so that they may be quickly repatriated.

Today's guidelines call on Member States, in coordination with the Commission, to designate ports around EU shores for fast-track crew changes, with adequate facilities for seafarers to undertake medical checks, quarantine if required by the country in question, and transport connections onward to their home country.

The pandemic has already led to extension of some contracts, potentially with a negative impact on wellbeing of seafarers. In all cases such extensions should take place with the agreement of the individuals concerned.

Cruise ships

Cruise operators should take overall responsibility for arranging the repatriation of passengers and crews from their cruise ships, including from non-EU ports. The Commission calls on flag States to help the operators identify the appropriate ports for disembarkation and support them in arranging disembarkation and repatriation of their customers and crew. If individuals on board are known to be infected with the coronavirus, the vessels should be directed to a port in close proximity where hospitals have sufficient capacity.

Sanitary recommendations and reporting

Ships must already submit a Maritime Declaration of Health before entering a port. In addition, the Commission recommends that approaching vessels communicate – four hours before the estimated time of arrival – the number of people on board and any confirmed or suspected COVID-19 infections.

The health and safety of seafarers and port workers is paramount. The Commission calls for personal protective equipment to be made available and used in line with existing recommendations and for seafarers to have access to adequate medical care if in need. Where all members of a crew are healthy and if their previous port call took place more than a fortnight ago, they should not be quarantined when they disembark to repatriate.

These guidelines do not cover crew members on fishing vessels, who fall under the scope of the recently adopted [guidance documents concerning the exercise of the free movement of workers](#) during COVID-19 outbreak and on [border management measures to protect health and ensure the availability of goods and essential services](#).

(European Commission)