



IMO takes action on seafarers' rights, substandard shipping

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Legal Committee adopts guidelines on fair treatment of seafarers held on suspicion of crimes; launches work on substandard shipping.

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) has adopted crucial new guidelines to protect seafarers from unfair treatment when detained in foreign jurisdictions in connection with alleged crimes committed at sea.

The guidelines, adopted by the Legal Committee during its meeting in London from 24 to 28 March, aim to protect seafarers' rights and ensure they are treated with fairness and dignity, no matter where they are in the world.

IMO Secretary-General Mr. Arsenio Dominguez stated: "Unfortunately, incidents of unjust treatment of seafarers are on the rise, posing a significant challenge to the sustainability of shipping. These cases not only undermine seafarers' morale but also discourage young talent from pursuing a career at sea."

He said the guidelines "will add a significant value in resolving the challenges faced by seafarers and ensure that seafarers are treated fairly."

Key aspects of the guidelines relate to due process, protection from arbitrary detention, coercion or intimidation, and ensuring that wages, medical care and repatriation rights should remain intact during any legal proceedings. The guidelines aim to improve coordination among countries, including port States, flag States, coastal States, States of which the seafarer is a national, shipowners, as well as seafarers.

The text was developed and first adopted in December 2024 by a Joint Tripartite Working Group with the International Labour Organization (ILO), which includes representation from governments, shipowners and seafarers.

Alarming increase in seafarer abandonment

The Legal Committee called for urgent action to tackle the sharp rise in seafarer abandonment cases, where shipowners fail to repatriate crew, pay wages, or provide basic necessities.

According to the IMO/ILO joint database on abandonment of seafarers, 310 new cases were reported in 2024 - more than double the 142 cases recorded in 2023. The trend continues in 2025, with 63 cases already reported in the first two months. The Committee urged Member States to report abandonment cases occurring in their ports or involving their flagged vessels and nationals; and improve the accuracy of these reports.

Member States were urged to update national contact points for handling cases, implement existing Guidelines on how to deal with seafarer abandonment cases, and raise awareness among seafarers about financial security protections.

The Committee welcomed the ongoing work by the Task Force coordinated by the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) to review and update the ILO/IMO Joint abandonment database. Member States are encouraged to work with the Task Force to improve the database further.

Tackling substandard shipping

The Committee discussed the need to address substandard shipping, given the rise of unlawful operations which distort the global playing field, increase risks to safety, security and the environment.

The Committee approved the proposal to conduct a regulatory scoping exercise to review IMO conventions and other tools available to Member States, with the aim of developing actions to prevent unlawful operations, including substandard shipping.

A correspondence group will be set up to start working on this new output, following approval of its terms of reference by the IMO Council in July 2025.