

SEAFARERS DESERVE RECOGNITION & APPRECIATION – WISTA NIGERIA

#Seafarers: In The face of the Pandemic

#SeafarersAreKeyWorkers

Women's International Shipping and Trading Association (WISTA) Nigeria is excited to join other organisations in celebrating Seafarers as we mark this year's **Day of the Seafarers (DoTS)**. Seafarers are key workers and they play key role in our industry. Paying more attention to the humans who work on board the vessels is a key success factor to the global Shipping Industry.

The world at large may know but should be reminded that the sea is not as friendly as it seems when seen from the shore and despite technological advancement and innovations in ships, seafarers at sea are at the mercy of nature and Shipping Policies.

Being at the frontline in the global fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, they play an essential role in maintaining the global flow of vital goods, such as food, medicines and medical supplies.

Chukwu, a crew on board a liner vessel, left home early March 2020, for a voyage that was originally scheduled to last for 35 days. Based on the initial plan in the contract he signed with the shipping company, he was supposed to return to his pregnant wife who was due to bring to bed by mid-April, sadly, he was still at sea when his first child came into this world. No thanks to the restriction of movement occasioned by the breakout of the COVID - 19 pandemic the world over, he is still unsure of when he will be able to see his son born almost 2 months ago.

Chukwu, and many other seafarers like him, have been caught in the gale of the decisions made about the pandemic, without any much of thoughts towards their welfare, or the roles they play in situations like this. While the world is on lockdown, they are away from their loved ones carrying out their duties at sea, ensuring that cargo is delivered on time.

10 years ago, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) designated June 25 every year as the International Day of Seafarers, to highlight the work done by seafarers. As IMO estimates, **90% of goods in the world are transported by sea**. Seafarers are the ones who are responsible, both for operating these ships and for ensuring smooth and secure delivery of their valuable cargo. Thus, this day has been adopted by the United Nations and the IMO so that the entire world can appreciate the importance of seafarers.

Today, over 90% of global trade is done by sea, since it is still the most cost-effective way to transport goods. Globally, there are over 50,000 merchant ships trading internationally and the total cargo capacity of the world merchant shipping fleet is 1.75 billion deadweight tonnes (DWT). The people responsible for maintaining, running and operating the fleet are seafarers.

There are over 1.6 million seafarers worldwide. How do we attract millennials to take up the profession, if not through greater support and improved welfare for seafarers.

The vast majority of international trade is done by sea, due to relatively low costs and greater economy of space. If trade by sea were limited in some way, or stopped altogether, there is no way that the global economy would be able to function. In other words, we owe our current ways of life to those who travel the seas who have to fight the toughest seas and roughest weather including piracy, yet they are resilient enough to accept this reality of their profession. Can you imagine what will happen to the world's economy if seafarers refuse to work especially on piracy-prone routes?

In his **Day of the Seafarer message, IMO Secretary-General Kitack Lim** stressed the importance of the work seafarers do. "Just like other key workers, seafarers are on the front line in this global fight. They deserve our thanks. But they also need – and deserve – quick and decisive humanitarian action from governments everywhere, not just during the pandemic, but at all times", Mr. Lim said.

However, the crisis has led to difficult working conditions for seafarers, including uncertainties and difficulties about port access, re-supply, crew changeovers and repatriation.

This year, the theme of the campaign is **Seafarers Are Keyworkers**. The campaign this year calls on Member States to recognize seafarers as key workers – and to provide them with the support, assistance and travel options open to all key workers during the pandemic.

In Nigeria, for instance, the Government made a policy that ensured that the port remains open for business and this policy is being implemented by the agencies of government saddled with such responsibilities as well as the Presidential Taskforce on COVID-19 that also ensures that goods are circulated in-country amid the interstate lockdown.

With the implementation of this policy, government has created an important supply chain for all the services and goods needed to fight the pandemic head-on.

Otunba Kunle Folarin, chairman, the National Seafarers Welfare Board (NSWB), recently pointed out that lack of crew changing and travel restrictions associated with the COVID-19 lockdown, were the greatest problems facing seafarers.

According to him, the closure of airports for close to two months now, have made it difficult for ship owners to disembark seafarers, or for an intending seafarer to join a vessel in any Nigerian port particularly as commercial airlines are not in operation.

Francis Bunu, a frontline seafarer and president of Seafarers Branch of Maritime Workers Union of Nigeria, has also identified inability of seafarers to travel to their home states after coming ashore as the major problem facing seafarers at this period of Covid-19. He noted that the

union has sent an appeal to the federal government of Nigeria to classify seafarers as essential duty workers, as stated by international bodies such as ILO and IMO.

Presently, seafarers cannot move freely within the shores of any country where they are trading due to the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic.

For instance, Türkan Bahar Gel, a Bulgarian Oceangoing Watchkeeping Officer has been on board for more than 120 days, according to her posts on Instagram.

This prolonged stay of the seafarers onboard vessels has led to fatigue and increased frustration.

A big thank you given in the direction of the seafarers is very important, as a recognition of their immense contributions to the containment and management of the COVID 19 pandemic the world over. Everyone should treat seafarers with the respect and dignity they deserve so that they can continue to provide their vital services to keep world trade moving. Just like the frontline healthcare workers that are presently in hospitals across the globe fighting the dreaded Covid-19 pandemic head-on to save lives, there are also seamen onboard oceangoing vessels whose responsibilities are to deliver essentials to where they are needed, and ensure that the world trade remains uninterrupted despite the lockdown in states.

Many seafarers like Chukwu and Türkan have been away from home for months and are unsure when they will be able to return home due to travel restrictions.

After risking their lives fighting the strong waves at sea, piracy, and other health hazards a long way from home and their loved ones, the least we can and should do as a people is to give them the deserved recognition and appreciation, not only on the 25th of June, but also every time by enacting and implementing thoughtful policies to protect their welfare.

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