

Indian Seafarers Under Fire: Challenges of Protecting Citizens in the Gulf

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Indian Seafarers Latest News

- India has lodged a strong protest with the United States after the U.S. Navy fired missiles at three merchant ships carrying Indian crew members in the Gulf region. One of these attacks killed three Indian seafarers aboard the tanker Settebello.
- India summoned a U.S. Embassy representative to register its objection. In response, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio told External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar that violations of the American blockade and “illicit transport of Iranian oil” would not be tolerated.
- EAM reiterated India’s position publicly, calling such lethal action against commercial shipping “not justified.”

How Many Indians Work as Seafarers, and Where

- India has an estimated **3.5 lakh seafarers** working on ships around the world — meaning **one in every six seafarers** globally is Indian.

- More than half of them are in active service at any given time, mostly on foreign-flagged ships (ships registered under another country's flag).
- In the Gulf region specifically, India's shipping authority (DG Shipping) estimates around **23,000 Indian seafarers** are currently working, with more than half based in the UAE.
- The International Maritime Organization (IMO) estimates that around 20,000 seafarers of all nationalities are currently stranded on ships in the Persian Gulf due to the ongoing tensions.

What Are “Sanctions,” and Why Were These Ships Targeted

- Marivex was sanctioned by the U.S. in December 2025 for alleged Iranian connections.
- Settebello had been flagged (identified as suspicious) by an American advocacy group called United Against Nuclear Iran, also citing Iranian links.
- It's important to understand: U.S. sanctions only legally apply within the U.S. — they are not automatically binding on other countries.
- However, sanctions have serious real-world consequences. Once a ship or its operating company is sanctioned, it often loses access to the international financial system and, critically, loses insurance cover.
- Without insurance, ports refuse to let the ship dock, and cargo owners refuse to use the ship — effectively crippling its operations even without direct military action.

Why Does the “Flag” of a Ship Matter So Much

- All three ships were registered under “**flags of convenience**” (FOCs) — meaning they were **officially registered** in countries like Panama, Marshall Islands, Liberia, or Guinea-Bissau (in this case, Palau for Settebello), even though their actual ownership and management had strong Indian links.
- This is a common practice in global shipping — companies register ships in countries with lighter regulations and oversight, regardless of where the ship's owners, crew, or operators are actually based.
- Such flags are also commonly used by ships carrying Russian or Iranian oil, since FOC countries are less likely to enforce sanctions strictly.

Why This Limits India's Options

- If a ship were Indian-flagged, India would have a much clearer legal basis to act — for example, the Indian Navy could escort or protect it more directly, citing its right to protect its own vessels.
 - Historically, during the Iran-Iraq war, the U.S. got several ships to re-flag as American specifically so it could legally escort them through the Strait of Hormuz.
- Since these ships were foreign-flagged, India's legal standing to intervene is much weaker — even though the crew, and in some cases the operational links, were Indian.

What Can India Actually Do

- India has previously shown it can and will act to protect its seafarers — for example, through **Operation Sankalp**, under which the Indian Navy and Coast Guard protected four merchant ships from Houthi attacks in 2024, and earlier action was taken against Somali pirates.

- However, the current situation is different and far more difficult for India to navigate.
- The Houthis and Somali pirates are non-state actors — relatively easier for India to act against without major diplomatic fallout.
- In this case, the parties involved are the United States and Iran — two powerful states locked in direct conflict.
- This significantly limits India's room for manoeuvre, leaving diplomatic protest as the primary tool available for now.

Does International Law Protect Seafarers

- The main global body for shipping rules is the International Maritime Organization (IMO), a UN agency.
- While IMO sets technical, safety, and environmental standards through consensus, it has **no real power to stop or punish** military attacks on ships — when individual nations act unilaterally, the IMO has historically been unable to intervene.
- The broader legal framework for the oceans is the **United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)** — a comprehensive treaty covering issues like passage through straits (such as Hormuz).
- However, UNCLOS has significant gaps in practice: the United States has never signed UNCLOS (it objects to provisions treating the deep seabed as a global commons), and Iran has signed but never ratified it.
- Crucially, there is no overarching global authority that can enforce these rules — ultimately, outcomes depend on the goodwill and restraint of individual governments.

Conclusion

- When global powers clash, it is often ordinary workers — far from any battlefield — who pay the price.
- For India, with hundreds of thousands of seafarers sailing under foreign flags, this episode is a sobering reminder that economic globalisation has outpaced the legal frameworks meant to protect those who keep it running.

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