

Seafarer Abandonment: West Asia War Raises Risks for Indian Seafarers

March 14, 2026 • vajiramandravi.com



Seafarer Abandonment Latest News

- The ongoing West Asia conflict has highlighted the growing dangers faced by commercial sailors, particularly Indian seafarers, as tankers and merchant ships near the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz come under attack.
- At least three Indian sailors have been killed, and industry experts warn of rising cases of **“abandonment,”** where shipowners stop supporting crews and vessels.
- Indians, who make up about **15%** of the global seafarer workforce, account for the highest number of abandoned sailors, with 1,125 cases reported in 2025, nearly 18% of global abandonment incidents.

Meaning of Seafarer Abandonment

- Seafarer abandonment occurs when shipowners stop providing support to crew members, leaving them stranded without wages, food, medical care, shelter, or means to return home.

- The **Maritime Labour Convention (MLC)**, 2006 defines abandonment as the failure of shipowners to fulfil these essential responsibilities.
- For many seafarers, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, leaving an abandoned vessel is difficult because they may have already paid significant amounts to agents for employment or training.
- Port regulations or visa restrictions often prevent abandoned sailors from going ashore, forcing them to remain on board ships without support while hoping for assistance from shipowners or authorities.

Reasons Behind Seafarer Abandonment

- Shipowners may abandon their crews when faced with **rising operational costs**, volatile freight rates, heavy debts, bankruptcy, or geopolitical conflicts.
- In such situations, some owners choose to cut ties rather than pay wages, maintain vessels, or arrange repatriation for crew members.

Role of the “Flag of Convenience” System

- A major factor enabling abandonment is the **Flag of Convenience (FOC) system**, under which ships register in countries offering lenient regulations, lower taxes, and weaker labour protections.
- This allows shipowners to bypass strict safety and labour standards.
- FOC registrations often hide the real ownership of vessels, enabling unscrupulous operators to avoid accountability and abandon ships and crews without facing legal consequences.
- According to the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF), about 30% of the global merchant fleet sails under FOCs, and 90% of abandoned ships in 2024 were registered under such flags.
 - Panama recorded the highest number of abandonment cases in 2025.

Impact of the West Asia Crisis

- Experts warn that ongoing conflict in West Asia could worsen the situation.
- Financial stress on shipping companies operating in the region may increase the risk of more vessels and seafarers being abandoned in the future.

Recent Cases of Abandoned Indian Seafarers

- Several recent incidents highlight the growing problem of Indian seafarers being stranded on vessels in conflict-prone or unstable maritime regions.
- **MV Manali (March 2026)**: Twenty Indian sailors and two others were stranded near Bandar Abbas Port in Iran during active bombings and appealed for rescue through social media.
- During abandonment, food, fuel, and drinking water often become scarce, forcing crew members to depend on nearby ports or external assistance for basic supplies.
- **Regions with Frequent Abandonment Cases** – Abandonments frequently occur in high-traffic or politically unstable maritime zones, including Turkey, the UAE, and the broader Gulf region, particularly near conflict-affected waters.

- **Repatriation Efforts** – Between 2025 and 2026, more than 100 Indian seafarers were repatriated from 14 vessels stranded in ports such as Sharjah (UAE), Tartus (Syria), Shinas (Oman), and Qatar.

Why Indian Seafarers Are More Vulnerable to Abandonment

- Many Indians view seafaring as a **pathway out of poverty**, especially in smaller towns and rural areas where maritime salaries are significantly higher than local earnings.
- A rise in **rogue recruitment agents** has worsened the problem. These agents often charge large fees for fake job placements, forged certificates, or non-existent opportunities, leaving recruits financially burdened and vulnerable.
- Experts point to regulatory weaknesses, such as the ease of obtaining a **Continuous Discharge Certificate** (CDC) through short courses, which creates unrealistic expectations of guaranteed employment.
- With more recruits entering the maritime sector than available jobs, many Indian sailors end up working on high-risk or poorly regulated vessels, increasing their chances of abandonment.

Protections and Support Mechanisms for Seafarers

- **International Support Through ITF** – Abandoned seafarers can seek assistance from International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) inspectors, who help with wage negotiations, legal support, and repatriation.
- **Assistance from Indian Authorities** – Indian seafarers can contact the Directorate General of Shipping (**DG Shipping**) through its round-the-clock helpline for embassy assistance, emergency funds, and grievance redressal. Complaints can also be filed through the regulator's website.
- **Preventive Measures for Seafarers** – Experts advise sailors to verify Recruitment and Placement Service Licensees (RPSL), avoid agents demanding fees, and ensure contracts are genuine. Early contact with welfare organisations can help prevent severe crises.
- **Role of the Directorate General of Shipping** – In India, the DG Shipping oversees verification of ships, shipowners, and recruitment agencies to ensure compliance with maritime regulations and protection of seafarers' rights.

Source: IE

Source: <https://vajiramandravi.com/current-affairs/west-asia-war-raises-risks-for-indian-seafarers/>

© Vajiram & Ravi. For personal use only.