



KAMARAJ IAS ACADEMY
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Rising Concerns Over Seafarer Abandonment and Shadow Fleet Operations

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Recent incidents involving Indian seafarers stranded on vessels linked to "shadow fleet" operations have highlighted growing concerns regarding seafarer abandonment, maritime safety, and international maritime governance. Indian seafarers have increasingly been affected by ship abandonment and conflicts involving vessels engaged in sanctioned trade activities.?

A "shadow fleet" refers to ships that employ deceptive shipping practices to transport sanctioned commodities, such as oil, while evading international sanctions and regulatory oversight. These vessels often conceal ownership, manipulate tracking systems, and conduct covert ship-to-ship transfers.

The issue has gained prominence following recent attacks on vessels carrying Indian crew members and the increasing number of abandoned ships worldwide. Indian seafarers constituted the largest number of abandoned seafarers globally in 2025.

About Seafarer Abandonment

According to the International Maritime Organization (IMO), a seafarer is considered abandoned when:

The shipowner fails to cover repatriation costs.

The seafarer is left without necessary maintenance and support.

Wages are not paid for at least two months.

The shipowner severs ties with the crew without fulfilling contractual obligations.

About Shadow Fleet

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A shadow fleet comprises vessels involved in transporting sanctioned goods while avoiding detection.

Such ships often carry oil from sanctioned countries such as Iran, Russia, and Venezuela.

Common tactics employed include:

Switching off or manipulating the Automatic Identification System (AIS).

Frequent changes in flags and ownership.

Conducting ship-to-ship transfers in international waters.

Operating under opaque corporate structures.

About Automatic Identification System (AIS)

AIS is an automatic vessel-tracking system used for maritime navigation and safety.

It transmits a ship's identity, position, speed, and course in real time.

AIS helps prevent collisions and assists maritime authorities in monitoring vessel movements.

Why is it Important?

Raises concerns over the safety and welfare of Indian seafarers.

Highlights gaps in international maritime governance and enforcement.

Emphasizes the need for stronger regulation of shadow fleet activities.

Has implications for global energy trade, maritime security, and sanctions enforcement.

Affects India's maritime workforce, which is among the largest globally.

Additional Key Facts:

United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)

Adopted: 1982

Came into force: 1994

Often referred to as the "Constitution for the Oceans".

Provides the legal framework governing all activities in oceans and seas.

India is a signatory to UNCLOS.

International Maritime Organization (IMO)

Established: 1948 (came into force in 1958)

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Headquarters: London, United Kingdom

Specialized agency of the United Nations responsible for maritime safety, security, and prevention of marine pollution.

Maritime Labour Convention (MLC), 2006

Adopted by the International Labour Organization (ILO).

Known as the "Seafarers' Bill of Rights".

Establishes minimum working and living standards for seafarers worldwide.

Provides mechanisms for compensation and repatriation of abandoned seafarers.

Directorate General of Shipping (DGS)

Functions under the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways.

Responsible for implementing shipping legislation and ensuring maritime safety standards in India.

India and Global Seafaring

India is one of the world's largest suppliers of seafarers.

Indian seafarers serve on merchant vessels across the globe.

The maritime sector plays a crucial role in India's trade, with nearly 95% of India's trade by volume being carried through maritime transport.

Exam Focus Points (Quick Revision Notes):

Issue in News ? Seafarer Abandonment and Shadow Fleet Operations

Key Concern ? Safety and welfare of seafarers

Shadow Fleet ? Vessels using deceptive practices to transport sanctioned commodities

International Convention ? UNCLOS, 1982

Key Maritime Agency ? International Maritime Organization (IMO)

Labour Convention ? Maritime Labour Convention (MLC), 2006

Tracking System Used by Ships ? Automatic Identification System (AIS)

Indian Regulatory Authority ? Directorate General of Shipping (DGS)

UNCLOS is Known As ? Constitution for the Oceans

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