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The human element under siege: maritime resilience and the moral responsibility of Port State Control

THE ongoing geopolitical tensions in the Strait of Hormuz and the southern Red Sea have precipitated a severe humanitarian crisis within the maritime sector.

As of April 2026, Lloyd's List Intelligence reports more than 600 vessels – including 325 tankers – stranded in the Gulf, while the International Maritime Organization (IMO) confirms that approximately 20,000 seafarers remain aboard ships unable to transit the Strait of Hormuz.

This article examines the psychological, legal and systemic dimensions of this crisis through the lens of Port State Control (PSC) authority and responsibility. Drawing on direct field experience and parallels with the COVID-19 crew change crisis, the author argues that PSC must evolve beyond technical compliance auditing to encompass active humanitarian advocacy.

The article concludes with a set of operational and policy recommendations aimed at strengthening the protection of seafarers in high-risk and conflict-affected areas.

Introduction: a Fleet in limbo

As of April 2026, the maritime industry faces a critical escalation in regional tensions with direct and measurable humanitarian consequences. The effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz – driven by intensifying geopolitical tensions and severe security threats – has produced a maritime emergency of unprecedented scale in modern times.

According to Lloyd's List

Intelligence, more than 600 commercial vessels, including 325 tankers, remain stranded in the Gulf, unable to transit the Strait.

The IMO has confirmed that approximately 20,000 seafarers are currently aboard these ships, facing what the IMO Secretary-General described as “dwindling supplies, fatigue and severe psychological stress” (IMO, April 2026).

These vessels are not detained by any formal legal order; they are operationally entrapped, immobilised by the convergence of security threats, insurance suspensions and the practical unavailability of safe transit corridors.

This distinction is legally and operationally significant. A significant proportion of stranded crew members have now remained aboard for periods that substantially exceed the maximum 11-month service period stipulated under the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC, 2006).

This situation must not be framed merely as an operational disruption; it constitutes a collective immobilisation of a critical segment of the global maritime workforce, with severe and compounding humanitarian consequences.

The psychological toll: a war of attrition on the human element

The impact on affected seafarers is both profound and multi-dimensional. Prolonged operational entrapment within a designated high-risk area (HRA) or active conflict zone generates conditions

of sustained psychological stress with identifiable clinical manifestations, including the following.

Chronic anxiety and hyper-vigilance

The persistent threat of drone and missile attacks in the surrounding area – with at least 21 confirmed attacks on commercial vessels recorded by the IMO since hostilities began on 28 February 2026 – induces a state of combat-induced fatigue that demonstrably impairs cognitive function and operational decision-making capacity.

Compounded isolation

Seafarers report experiencing a dual sense of confinement – constrained by both maritime geography and geopolitical forces entirely beyond their individual agency or professional remit. Some crew members have begun rationing food and fresh water supplies, with reported cases of vessels relying on limited provisions of sugar and rice (Bloomberg, March 2026).

Secondary trauma and family system breakdown

The psychological impact extends beyond the vessel to affect the seafarer's immediate family unit. Spouses, children and dependent relatives are subjected to sustained uncertainty and severely limited communication, a condition associated in clinical literature with secondary traumatic stress. The resulting deterioration of the seafarer's primary support network exacerbates the risk of depressive disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among crew members.



The port of Salalah in Oman.

Field observation: a personal testimony from Port State Control

In my capacity as a Port State Control officer, I have conducted inspections aboard vessels where the psychological atmosphere among crew members was immediately perceptible.

During one such inspection, I encountered a seafarer whose contract had been unilaterally extended to 18 months – far exceeding the 11-month maximum prescribed by the MLC, 2006. The seafarer displayed clinical indicators consistent with prolonged psychological distress: flat affect, marked social withdrawal and an evident deterioration of professional engagement.

Despite the unambiguous provisions of the MLC, operational and geopolitical barriers had rendered the Convention's protections functionally unenforceable in practice. This experience crystallised a form of institutional

helplessness that merits serious professional reflection.

Port State Control officers are trained to identify and rectify technical deficiencies, such as a malfunctioning fire suppression pump, an expired certificate or an inadequately maintained liferaft. However, the existing inspection framework provides no corresponding mechanism for addressing the systematic erosion of a seafarer's psychological wellbeing across hundreds of days of involuntary operational entrapment.

This encounter reinforced the conviction that PSC's mandate must evolve – from technical compliance auditing to active humanitarian advocacy.

Strategic failure: lessons unlearned from the COVID-19 pandemic

A dispassionate assessment of the current crisis reveals a troubling pattern of institutional repetition. During the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 400,000

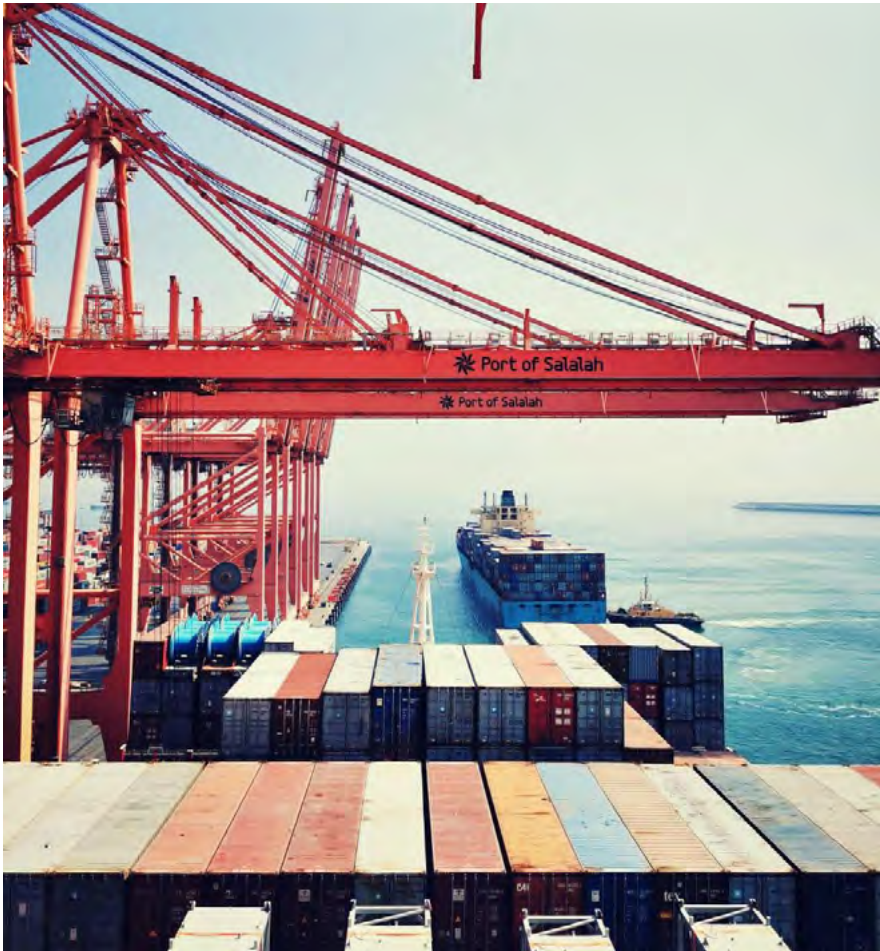
seafarers were stranded aboard vessels globally due to the collapse of crew change mechanisms.

The international maritime community's response, though ultimately effective, was reactive, fragmented and chronically delayed.

Today, while the absolute scale differs, the nature of the entrapment is qualitatively more severe: it is driven by active military conflict, sustained drone and missile threats, and the de facto suspension of freedom of navigation through a critical global chokepoint.

The industry's continued failure to establish protected humanitarian corridors for crew relief operations in such scenarios – despite the COVID-19 precedent – represents a structural gap in global maritime resilience.

Five weeks into the Strait of Hormuz crisis, the IMO declared a humanitarian emergency, with



A container ship berthing in Salalah.

the number of stranded seafarers still unchanged at approximately 20,000 (*Container Management*, April 2026). This institutional inertia places operational continuity, legal compliance and human welfare in direct, unresolved tension.

The role of Port State Control: expanding the mandate

Port State Control must be repositioned as the last effective institutional line of defence for seafarers in conflict-affected and operationally-entrapped scenarios. To fulfil this expanded mandate, PSC inspection regimes should be augmented to incorporate the following measures.

Mandatory verification of mental health support provisions

Inspections should systematically verify that shipowners have made provision for professional psychological

counselling services for crew members transiting or operating within designated HRAs. Compliance with this requirement should be treated as a condition of port entry.

Rigorous contractual service period audits

Any vessel carrying crew members whose service periods have exceeded the 11-month MLC limit must be subject to immediate deficiency notation and escalated to flag state authorities through established diplomatic channels. Extended operational entrapments resulting from geopolitical circumstances should be formally recorded and reported to the IMO.

Guaranteed digital connectivity as a fundamental right

Access to reliable digital communication must be formally recognised as a basic welfare entitlement for seafarers

operating in high-tension zones. PSC inspections should verify the adequacy of onboard communication infrastructure, with particular attention to vessels operating in or transiting conflict-affected areas.

Conclusion

A safe ship, within the modern understanding of maritime safety, is not simply one that achieves technical compliance with SOLAS or MARPOL. It is a vessel in which the psychological and physical integrity of every crew member is actively protected.

The more than 20,000 seafarers currently stranded in the geopolitical crosshairs of the Strait of Hormuz are not incidental casualties of an abstract political dispute; they are the indispensable human infrastructure of global civilisation.

If the maritime community continues to subordinate seafarer welfare to commercial expedience and political convenience, the long-term consequence will be a structural exodus of experienced professionals from the industry – a talent loss that global trade will prove ill-equipped to absorb.

The moral and institutional responsibility to prevent this outcome rests, in significant part, with Port State Control.

Author's note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author in his personal capacity and do not represent the official position of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology of the Sultanate of Oman or any other governmental body.

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