



SECURITY OF INDIAN SEAFARERS - GS III MAINS

Q. Ensuring the safety and security of Indian seafarers is paramount in maintaining the vitality of the maritime industry and safeguarding international trade. Discuss the vulnerabilities faced by the Indian seafarers in the present geo-political context. (15 marks, 250 words)

News: *The Indian seafarer deserves better in choppy high seas*

What's in the news?

- The safety and security of Indian seafarers have become increasingly concerning due to recent attacks on commercial ships in sensitive regions.

Key takeaways:

- India has proactively addressed these issues by submitting three papers to the International Maritime Organisation's Legal Committee, emphasising the need for comprehensive maritime security and improved contractual conditions for seafarers.
- While acknowledging the IMO's efforts to combat maritime fraud, India has called for broader international cooperation to tackle various maritime threats.

Maritime Security Challenges:

1. Resurgence of Piracy and Armed Robbery:

- Recent incidents off the coast of Somalia, including hijackings of vessels like the MV Ruen and MV Lila Norfolk, indicate a resurgence of piracy.
- These acts pose significant threats to the safety and security of seafarers and disrupt maritime trade routes.

2. Extremist Attacks and Regional Conflicts:

- The maritime domain has become increasingly susceptible to extremist attacks and regional conflicts, posing grave risks to seafarers and maritime security.
- With geopolitical tensions rising in sensitive regions such as the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz, the safety of commercial vessels and seafarers navigating through these areas is of paramount concern.

3. Unlawful Recruitment Practices:

- The exploitation of seafarers through unlawful recruitment practices exacerbates maritime security challenges and jeopardises the well-being of seafarers.
- India highlights the impact of such practices on seafarers' rights and stresses the need for international coordination to address these issues.
- Over 200 cases of seafarer exploitation have been reported to the Indian Maritime Administration since 2020, underscoring the urgency of addressing this issue to protect the rights and safety of seafarers globally.



4. Vulnerabilities of Indian Seafarers:

a. Vulnerability to Incidents:

- India, with 9.35% of global seafarers and ranking third globally, confronts such incidents.
- Indian seafarers face significant vulnerabilities due to incidents such as vessel seizures and detentions, as exemplified by the cases of MSC Aries and MT Heroic Idun.
- These incidents not only endanger the safety of seafarers but also disrupt their livelihoods and cause distress to their families.

b. Lack of Legal Representation and Awareness:

- A survey reveals that most Indian seafarers lack legal representation and are unaware of their rights.
- This leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and unfair treatment, as they may not be equipped to navigate complex legal processes or assert their rights effectively.

c. Unfair Treatment and Exploitation:

- Many Indian seafarers report feeling unfairly treated and exploited, particularly in cases of unlawful recruitment practices and contract violations.
- This not only affects their physical and mental well-being but also erodes trust in the maritime industry and undermines their confidence in their careers at sea.

d. Disruption to Employment and Livelihoods:

- Incidents such as vessel seizures and detentions can lead to prolonged disruptions to seafarers' employment and livelihoods, causing financial hardship and uncertainty for them and their families.
- These disruptions can have long-term consequences for seafarers' careers and overall well-being.

e. Psychological Impact:

- The constant threat of piracy, armed robbery, and other maritime security challenges can have a profound psychological impact on seafarers, leading to increased stress, anxiety, and trauma.
- The Maritime Union of India highlighted a 40% increase in kidnappings in the Gulf of Guinea, with 134 cases of assault, injury, and threats reported.
- Incidents such as the kidnapping of 20 Indian nationals from the MT Duke (off the western coast of Africa) and the ship owners paying hefty ransoms highlight the dangers faced by seafarers.

Indian Initiatives to Protect Seafarers' Rights:

'Human Rights at Sea' Initiative:

- In response to the challenges faced by Indian seafarers, the Indian government and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) launched the 'Human Rights at Sea' initiative.
- The initiative involves documenting cases of seafarer abuse, exploitation, and illegal detention to provide evidence of human rights violations in the maritime industry.



Aim:

- To raise awareness of human rights issues in the maritime industry and advocate for the protection of seafarers' rights.
- By highlighting cases of abuse, exploitation, and illegal detention, the initiative seeks to hold ship owners and other stakeholders accountable for violations against seafarers.

Key Features:

- The initiative engages in advocacy and awareness campaigns to educate stakeholders, including seafarers, ship owners, maritime authorities, and the general public, about seafarers' rights and the importance of upholding human rights standards in the maritime industry.
- The initiative advocates for the establishment of mechanisms to protect seafarers' rights, including grievance mechanisms, legal aid services, and whistleblower protection programs.

Way Forward:

1. Comprehensive Approach to Address Piracy:

- Addressing piracy requires a multifaceted and comprehensive approach that encompasses both land-based and maritime strategies.
- While maritime security measures such as deploying private guards on merchant navy ships can help deter piracy to some extent, addressing the root causes and underlying conditions that enable piracy is essential for long-term effectiveness.
- Regional cooperation and information sharing mechanisms, such as joint patrols, intelligence sharing, and coordinated responses to pirate attacks, are essential for enhancing maritime security and deterring piracy in piracy-prone regions.

2. Government Support:

- Indian seafarers require robust government support to ensure their safety, security, and well-being at sea.
- This support may include diplomatic efforts to address piracy and maritime security threats through international cooperation and engagement with relevant stakeholders.
- Governments can also provide assistance and resources for initiatives aimed at protecting seafarers' rights, enhancing maritime security, and promoting safe navigation.

3. Enhanced Protection Measures:

- The maritime industry and relevant authorities must implement enhanced protection measures to safeguard Indian seafarers from security threats, exploitation, and unfair treatment.
- This may involve strengthening security protocols, improving contractual conditions, providing legal representation and support services, and raising awareness of seafarers' rights and responsibilities.
- Companies and employers should also prioritise the safety and well-being of their seafaring employees by investing in training, equipment, and risk mitigation strategies.



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4. Financial and Social Support:

- Seafarers and their families may require financial and social support to cope with the challenges and disruptions caused by security threats, incidents at sea, and prolonged periods away from home.
- This support may include financial assistance for affected seafarers and their families, access to counselling and mental health services, and initiatives to address the social and psychological impact of maritime security challenges on seafarers and their loved ones.

Ensuring the safety and security of Indian seafarers is paramount in maintaining the vitality of the maritime industry and safeguarding international trade. Initiatives such as the 'Human Rights at Sea' initiative and India's submissions to the IMO's Legal Committee demonstrate a proactive approach to addressing the challenges faced by Indian seafarers. However, sustained international cooperation and government support are essential to effectively protect the rights and well-being of Indian seafarers in an increasingly complex maritime environment.

