

INDIA ASKS CHINA TO ALLOW CREW CHANGE FOR STRANDED SAILORS

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Indian Ambassador Vikram Misri has raised with China the issue of stranded Indian sailors in ships off Chinese ports, asking the authorities to allow an early approval for a crew change.

Mr. Misri took up the issue with China's Vice Foreign Minister, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said on Friday, with details for changing the crew still being worked out.

Two ships, MV Jag Anand and MV Anastasia, are among several carrying Australian coal that have been unable to offload their cargo after China essentially banned coal imports amid deteriorating relations with Australia. There are 23 Indian sailors on the bulk carrier MV Jag Anand which has been stuck off the Jingtang port on the Bohai Sea in northern China since June, and 16 others on MV Anastasia, which has been off the port of Caofeidian, also in Hebei, since September.

New outbreak

Complicating the situation is a new outbreak of COVID-19 cases in Hebei province, which has gone into "wartime" mode after more than 100 cases were reported this week and 11 million people in the city of Shijiazhuang have been put under lockdown.

The Sydney Morning Herald reported this week there are about 70 ships waiting, caught in between China not allowing them to unload and "importers and ship charterers [that] are demanding the ships wait regardless."

China has said the ships are free to leave and has placed the responsibility on freight forwarding companies for resolving the impasse. The companies neither want to incur the costs of the cargo nor lose their waiting spots, leaving the sailors caught in the middle.

"In view of China's strict COVID-19 pandemic control and prevention measures as well as various travel restrictions in place, the Chinese authorities have outlined detailed steps to ensure the smooth movement of new crew to China to effect crew change," MEA spokesperson Anurag Srivastava said on Friday.

"These steps have to be complied with by the shipping companies concerned. With regard to the request of exploring alternative modes of crew change at sea, this possibility has also been taken up by with Chinese authorities, who have indicated that the details for this option are being worked out. We are awaiting these details from Chinese authorities."

India, he said, "will continue to remain in touch with various relevant Chinese authorities as well as shipping companies to ensure that the humanitarian needs of the crew are taken care of and that crew changes can be effected at the earliest."

On the situation along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), Mr. Srivastava said both sides had maintained communication at the ground level "to avoid any misunderstandings and misjudgments" but did not say when the next round of talks between Corps Commanders would be held.

Both sides had agreed on December 18, following a meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China border affairs, to hold the next round at an early date but have failed to agree on a date so far, underlining the broader impasse in taking forward disengagement and a return to the status quo prior to China's transgressions last May.

"The two sides have agreed to hold the next round of Senior Commanders meeting and are in constant communication through diplomatic and military channels in this regard," he said. "In the meantime, both sides have maintained communication at the ground level to avoid any misunderstandings and misjudgments."

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