



HUMAN RIGHTS AT SEA

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2014



## Human Rights at Sea

Independent Case Review  
& Insight Briefing Note

## Addressing the Future of Seafaring in Kiribati

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Foreword</b>	<b>3/4</b>	Rokai	12
<b>Author</b>	<b>5</b>	Taitiuea Reevi	14
Funding	5	Ang George	16
Conflict of Interest	5	Family Impact Statement	18
Disclaimer	5	Tekaiti Tobiro	19
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>Global Update on I-Kiribati Crewmembers</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Background</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>22</b>
Why Kiribati?	7	1: Repatriation	21
A Small State Island Nation fractured by the Crew Change Crisis	8	2: Future Employment in the Pacific Agriculture Industry	21
The Seafarers of Kiribati: A Globally Dispersed Workforce	8/9	3: Future Employment in the Pacific Maritime Industry	22
A Bleak Future for Kiribati's Seafarers	10	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>24</b>
The Future of SPMS and the fight for Kiribati's Future in Shipping	11	<b>The Deutsche Seemannsmission and The Seafarers' Charity</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Crew Impact: Interviews with Brisbane Crew Representatives</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>Maersk Statement</b>	<b>26</b>



# Human Rights at Sea

INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE  
ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI

## Foreword

*“Over 250 I-Kiribati seafarers have been discharged from their ships, isolated, and then left waiting across several countries, including Australia, pending repatriation. Most have completed their legal contracts with many having been away from their homes for over two years... this additional delay in their returning home is having a significant physical and emotional impact on the seafarer, their families, and their communities, with no end in sight.”*

Seafaring is not a new occupation, nor one that is well-recognised in the public’s awareness. Ships have plied the world’s oceans for millennia facilitating global trade on routes that circumnavigated the planet. Those people either chose such a career or were ‘press-ganged’ to work on board these ships. Then and now, they face similar adversities. Whether it be the significant isolation, lack of communications with home, extreme weather, abandonment, hijackings or piracy, there are many similarities that today’s seafarer endures for months on end. They remain as invisible to the general public today as they did centuries ago and yet today, with all the advancements in technology and living standards, these ‘key workers’ are often sourced from nations on the basis they are cheap to employ and content to work in such a demanding environment for significant periods of time. This reflects their desire to provide for their family and, in many cases, for their wider communities back home.

Seafarers from rapidly developing economic states including Philippines, India, China, Ukraine, Russia and the Pacific Islands, are known to support up to 20 people on their single wage. For most, this psychological and practical ‘hook’ into the life of seafaring comes at a cost that most of us from the developed world cannot conceive.

Seafarers themselves are global labour commodities, effectively working across multiple boundaries with no connection with the country they are trading to and from, often treated as potential illegal immigrants by foreign State authorities, and often displaced from their role by a cheaper source of labour. While established governance and legal structures have been put in place in a concerted effort to protect the minimum standards for their employment, breaches of these standards are common, total abandonment by shipowners is all too frequent, while the drive for ever cheaper manning costs for the shipowner continuously hangs over these ‘fly-in fly-out’ key workers of the sea.

The people of the tiny Pacific Island nation of Kiribati are no strangers to this life on the ocean. While fishing comes naturally to these islanders, and has done so for millennia, they have been delivering globally cost-effective crewing solutions for international shipping companies by providing seafarers to work on international trading vessels. These international shipping companies have enjoyed the benefits of this cost-competitive labour source, and in partnership with the likes of South Pacific Marine Services (SPMS), a local Kiribati crew management agency, have also invested in the future of the Kiribati as a competent and capable labour source. This business partnership has provided significant social and economic development benefits to the people, the communities, as well as the Kiribati government.

# Human Rights at Sea

## INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has now cast a dark cloud over the ongoing success of this commercial partnership and is already having an impact that is sending significant ripples through this tiny and vulnerable nation. This ripple effect has the potential to become a social and economic tsunami for I-Kiribati seafarers, and the nation as a whole.

At the time of writing, over 250 I-Kiribati seafarers have been discharged from their ships, isolated, and then left waiting across several countries, including Australia, pending repatriation. Most have completed their legal contracts, with many having been away from their homes for over two years with periods up to eight months living in a local hotel somewhere around the globe, far from their homes and families. Given the average contract under the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) 2006 of a Kiribati seafarer is 11 months, this additional delay in their returning home is having a significant physical and emotional impact on the seafarer, their families and their communities, with no end in sight.

The future for these seafarers, their families and their communities is now looking decidedly uncertain. The Kiribati government holds the key to unravelling this complex situation, however its concerns for the health of its citizens, its lack of infrastructure and health systems to address an outbreak in COVID-19, have established a current impasse.

Given most Kiribati seafarers have been told that their employment aboard international trading vessels has come to an end due to the impact of COVID-19 and their government's stance on border control, the implications are significant for the seafarers, and ultimately this tiny Pacific Island nation.

In this Human Rights at Sea case study, we take a detailed review of the current situation. We consider options to address the immediate issue of getting these 'key workers' back home after completing their contracts, and highlight practical recommendations. We also cover the more complex matters of the future employment of these seafarers and their contribution to their family, their community, and the continued economic development of Kiribati society.

**Captain Ross Nicholls**  
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**Brisbane, Australia**

23 September 2021

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23 September 2021

# Human Rights at Sea

INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE  
ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI

## Author

The author of this Independent Case Review and Insight Briefing Note is the UK-registered charitable non-governmental organisation (NGO), Human Rights at Sea (HRAS) supported by the Mission to Seafarers (MtS), Brisbane, Australia. HRAS is regulated by the UK Charity Commission and overseen by a Board of Trustees under English law. The work has been supported by subject matter experts (SMEs) from within the global welfare community and has been shared pre-publication with interested stakeholders for review and comment.

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## Conflict of Interest

There are no known conflicts of interest declared in the concept, preparation, drafting or publishing of this document. HRAS has conferred with other stakeholders engaged in this matter and exposed its work for awareness and use, as required.

## Disclaimer

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**Images:** All personal images are provided to HRAS and published with express permission.

<sup>1</sup> <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search/-/charity-details/5055244>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.humanrightsatsea.org/reports/>

# Human Rights at Sea

INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE  
ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI

## Introduction

The rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 coincided with the sudden and unexpected collapse of international crew transfers thereby launching the global maritime industry into disarray. While the world's dependence on seaborne trade sustained the movement of the vessels themselves, the seafarers manning them found themselves at the epicentre of a logistical challenge of global proportions. The onslaught of travel restrictions disrupted 'crew change', the established system by which crewmembers rotate at the beginning and end of their contractual work periods, with such severity that it sparked an apparent humanitarian crisis now widely known as the global 'crew change crisis' (the crisis).

The crisis has seen at its highest, up to approximately 400,000 seafarers stuck at sea working months beyond the expiry of their original contracts in direct contravention of the MLC 2006,<sup>3</sup> without passage home, and at times with another 400,000 unable to join their ships at all.<sup>4</sup>

In 2021, with a growing percentage of the maritime workforce still unrepatiated,<sup>5</sup> a globally dispersed community of seafarers from the Republic of Kiribati<sup>6</sup> found themselves in a particularly complex situation. An array of unique circumstances presented by the crisis, and Kiribati's position as a small island nation, have created a perfect storm of challenges which have displaced their maritime workforce and have jeopardised their future careers within the shipping industry.

This independent case study aims to explore the broad extent of the unfolding situation by focusing on a group of I-Kiribati<sup>7</sup> seafarers currently stranded in the city of Brisbane, on the east coast of Australia. With their express permission, the study highlights the experiences of four individuals representing this group to identify and examine key themes and consistencies across their personal stories. It extends its scope to include the experiences of their respective families and communities, whose livelihoods depend upon the seafarer as the key financial earner, rather than just a key worker. These personal stories lay the foundation for recommended solutions and strategies by which seafarers might be reunited with their families, and their futures in the industry better secured.



<sup>3</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---normes/documents/normativeinstrument/wcms\\_090250.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---normes/documents/normativeinstrument/wcms_090250.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.imo.org/en/MediaCentre/PressBriefings/Pages/32-crew-change-UNGA.aspx> (accessed on 07/08/2021)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.shippingaustralia.com.au/crew-change-crisis-continues-to-worsen/> (accessed on 07/08/2021)

<sup>6</sup> Henceforth referred to as 'Kiribati' in this case study. Pronounced 'Kiri-bas'.

<sup>7</sup> Where 'Kiribati' refers to the nation itself, 'I-Kiribati' refers to the nationality of its people. Such has been reflected throughout this document.

# Human Rights at Sea

INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE  
ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI

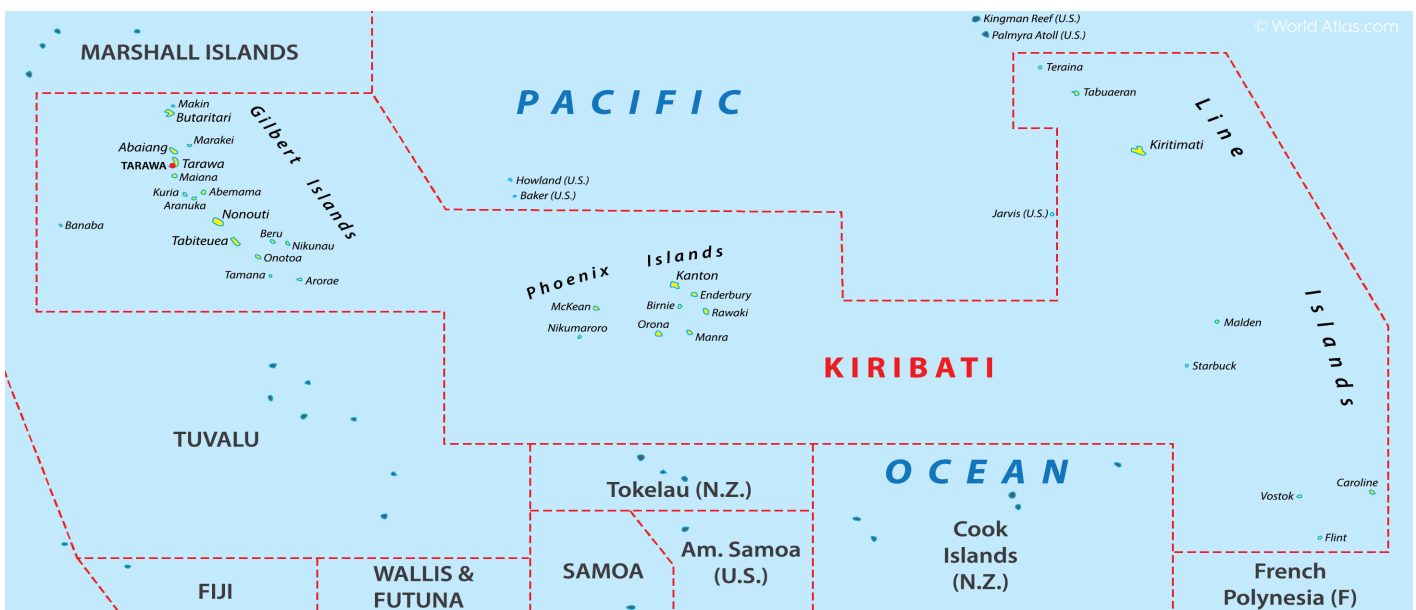
## Background

### Why Kiribati?

Kiribati's remote location and unique geographic features contribute largely to its vulnerability in the context of international transit, and in this case, crew change. The independent island nation is a collection of 33 atolls scattered across 3.5 million square kilometres in the central Pacific Ocean<sup>8</sup> and is home to a population of around 120,000 people. Seafaring is an integral element of Kiribati's culture and economy, with maritime workers' income accounting for almost 10% of the country's GDP.<sup>9</sup>

I-Kiribati seafarers joining or leaving internationally trading ships typically fly to and from the main island of Tarawa. Given the size and location of the country, journeys can be costly and time consuming, as the island is generally only accessible via transfer in Fiji, Australia, or New Zealand. The logistics of travelling to and from Kiribati presented perhaps the greatest challenge to seafarers when COVID-19 travel restrictions came into effect, as the few available routes were cut off. **From research undertaken to date, many of those who began the journey back to Kiribati earlier in the pandemic have yet to make it home despite best profiling efforts of shipping industry entities,<sup>10</sup> unions and welfare organisations.<sup>11,12,13</sup>**

The difficulty of returning to Kiribati is amplified by the nation's incapacity to effectively manage a potential COVID-19 outbreak. As of August 2021, Kiribati is completely free of COVID-19 cases.<sup>14</sup> Although strategies to transport seafarers safely back to the islands have been formulated and considered, the risk of an infected individual coming ashore seems to outweigh the urgency of their repatriation.



8 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/pacificislands/overview#1> (accessed on 09/08/2021)

9 <https://toda.org/global-outlook/covid-19-pandemic-triggered-seafarers-odyssey-back-to-the-pacific-islands.html> (accessed on 09/08/2021)

10 <https://www.tradewindsnews.com/ship-management/plea-to-save-200-kiribati-seafarers-trapped-in-covid-19-limbo/2-1-1030955> (accessed 01/09/2021)

11 March 8, 2021, BBC - about situation in Hamburg - <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-56308350> (accessed 01/09/2021)

12 Jul 27, 2021 ICMA in Discussion: Seafarers Welfare In Discussion: Kiribati Seafarers Stranded in Fiji, [https://youtu.be/xuIS0Zp\\_XFk](https://youtu.be/xuIS0Zp_XFk) (accessed 01/09/2021)

13 Aug 13, 2021 - Stranded Kiribati Seafarers visit Queensland Maritime Museum - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V5C9N93tErQ> (accessed 01/09/2021)

14 <https://covid19.who.int/region/wpro/country/ki> (accessed on 09/08/2021)

# Human Rights at Sea

INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE  
ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI

## A Small State Island Nation Fractured by the Crew Change Crisis

Kiribati's maritime workforce is comprised upwards of 500 professional seafarers, who typically spend up to 11 months away from home. This is the maximum contractual period of work permitted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as per the MLC 2006.<sup>15</sup> Now, with repatriation having been made impossible, some have been away from home for more than two years.

## The Seafarers of Kiribati: A Globally Dispersed Workforce

As of 31 August 2021, the known numbers and locations of displaced I-Kiribati seafarers are:

- Brisbane, Australia 39
- Nadi, Fiji 165
- Hamburg, Germany 20
- Jakarta, Indonesia 12
- Busan, South Korea 15
- **Total: 251**

There are few I-Kiribati seafarers currently left on ships, with Maersk, the world's largest integrated shipping company,<sup>16</sup> having started the removal of I-Kiribati nationals from their vessels. Welfare sources have flagged concern with HRAS that the process does not appear to acknowledge the amount of time the seafarers have left before their contracts expire. Maersk has assured HRAS that all seafarers from Kiribati have signed-off vessel towards or after the end of their contracts.

### Comment from Maersk<sup>17</sup>

**HRAS:** *Human Rights at Sea has been informed that you are currently in the process of removing I-Kiribati nationals from your vessels, some of whom have not completed their contractual work period. Is this correct, and if so, why?*

**Maersk:** **All our seafarers from Kiribati have signed-off vessel after end or near end of contract to ensure they will not become overdue ref ILO MLC.**

**HRAS:** *The removal of I-Kiribati seafarers from your vessels has been perceived in some quarters as 'deportation'. What is your position on this perception?*

**Maersk:** **All our seafarers from Kiribati have signed-off vessel after end or near end of contract. This to secure the wellbeing of the seafarers as well as securing compliance with ILO MLC.**

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---normes/documents/normativeinstrument/wcms\\_090250.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---normes/documents/normativeinstrument/wcms_090250.pdf) (accessed on 27/08/2021)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.maersk.com/about> (accessed on 27/08/2021)

<sup>17</sup> Response from Maersk received via email on 20/09/2021



# Human Rights at Sea

INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE  
ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI



In March 2021, a State representative from Kiribati reported that 320 seafarers were stranded in Brazil, Denmark, Germany, and Spain.<sup>18</sup> Since the beginning of the pandemic, a total of 210 seafarers have been returned to Kiribati, but this number has been stagnant since April 2021, when a COVID-19 outbreak in Fiji brought repatriation efforts to a halt.

At the time of writing, the total number of I-Kiribati seafarers in Brisbane has grown from 31 to 39 following the arrival of eight crewmembers transferred from overseas. With others in the process of being removed from their vessels, the Brisbane community is soon expected to grow to around 50. Maersk has informed HRAS that all I-Kiribati seafarers removed from Maersk vessels are now awaiting repatriation in Fiji and Australia, and that vaccinations are being arranged in the meantime.

## Comment from Maersk

**HRAS:** *Is it your plan to send [I-Kiribati] seafarers to Brisbane, Australia via Malaysia, or other locations to be repatriated and if so, what welfare safeguards are you putting in place to ensure they will be able to return home?*

**Maersk:** **All seafarers from Kiribati are at present waiting final repatriation in Fiji or Brisbane, Australia. Together with International Chamber of Shipping (ICS)<sup>19</sup> we are in dialogue with the Kiribati to secure our seafarers repatriation soonest. In the meantime we trying to secure our Kiribati seafarers access to COVID-19 vaccination.**

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.imo.org/en/MediaCentre/Pages/WhatsNew-1587.aspx> (accessed on 22/08/2021)

<sup>19</sup> HRAS has contacted the ICS for comment, but at the time of publication, no response has been received.

# Human Rights at Sea

## INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI

Although Brisbane is a favourable destination for I-Kiribati seafarers awaiting full repatriation while the country's border remains closed, the cost of the living expenses for those stranded indefinitely in Australia is significant. HRAS has further been informed that some I-Kiribati crewmembers waiting to be transferred from vessels in close proximity to Australia, were to instead be flown to Germany, however limited accommodation at designated hotels in Hamburg impacted this transition.

HRAS understands that the number of I-Kiribati seafarers in Nadi is comprised largely of crewmembers transferred from Hamburg. Research indicates that many of these individuals disembarked their vessels earlier in the pandemic to return to Kiribati but were flown to Germany due to limited repatriation flights.<sup>20</sup>

Seafarers are staying in hotels and hostels, gathering frequently in the largest room available to play cards, sing, play music and support each other mentally and emotionally. Each group has an appointed leader who is in regular contact with other leaders, effectively creating a network between the internationally dispersed groups. This designated leader also acts as a spokesperson on behalf of their group, communicating with local welfare organisations and their union back home.

Every stranded I-Kiribati group holds an official meeting called the Weekly Kiribati Island Overseas Seaman Union Meeting. The meeting is recorded and serves as an opportunity for the seafarers to formally raise concerns and communicate them to their union in Kiribati. Although the union endeavours to bring their rights to the fore, there has so far been little success, and the crewmembers are now attempting to engage international organisations to help fight for their repatriation.

### A Bleak Future for Kiribati's Seafarers

As the I-Kiribati seafarers' dilemma deteriorates, it appears that the shipping industry's ability to accommodate their circumstances are challenged by lack of Kiribati government engagement and agreement to repatriate. The shipping companies who recruit I-Kiribati seafarers are currently paying the living expenses of those stranded overseas. These ongoing costs and logistical difficulties have proved unsustainable and now threaten Kiribati's reputation in the shipping industry. **Meantime, I-Kiribati seafarers are coming to terms with the potential reality that, once repatriated, they are unlikely to ever be employed as seamen again.**

As of August 2021, Maersk has made an official decision to freeze the enlistment of I-Kiribati nationals. It appears this decision has triggered a domino effect which has put the future of seafaring in Kiribati at stake.

Maersk is the parent organisation of Hamburg Süd, which is one of five German shipping companies partnered under South Pacific Marine Services (SPMS).<sup>21</sup> SPMS is a recruitment agency which effectively serves as a gateway to international shipping for Kiribati's maritime workforce. With Hamburg Süd having withdrawn from the SPMS consortium following Maersk's exit from Kiribati, the consortium's future appears uncertain. HRAS has contacted the companies partnered under SPMS for comment, but at the time of publication, no response has been received.

<sup>20</sup> <https://toda.org/global-outlook/covid-19-pandemic-triggered-seafarers-odyssey-back-to-the-pacific-islands.html> (accessed on 09/08/2021)

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.mtc-tarawa.edu.ki/?page\\_id=13](http://www.mtc-tarawa.edu.ki/?page_id=13) (accessed on 21/08/2021)

# Human Rights at Sea

INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE  
ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI

## Comment from Maersk<sup>22</sup>

**HRAS:** *Can you confirm that you are withdrawing your membership from SPMS in Kiribati and the reason for this withdrawal?*

**Maersk:** **As a responsible employer we put the wellbeing of our seafarers first as well as compliance with ILO MLC etc. Given the Kiribati Government policy for the last 1.5 years of not allowing Kiribati seafarers to repatriate home to their families its not sustainable to employ seafarers from Kiribati.**

**HRAS:** *Are you planning on employing I-Kiribati seafarers at any stage in the future?*

**Maersk:** **At this stage we focus on the repatriation of our Kiribati seafarers who are stranded in Fiji and Australia.**

**HRAS:** *Some employees have raised private concerns regarding insufficient wages. How do you respond to this?*

**Maersk:** **The seafarers employment terms, incl. wage is regulated by a CBA.**

## The Future of SPMS and the Fight for Kiribati's Future in Shipping

For more than five decades, South Pacific Marine Services (SPMS) has employed I-Kiribati seafarers through a national training and recruitment programme. The companies have supported Kiribati's maritime workforce through a longstanding arrangement with the Kiribati government, and a training initiative at the Marine Training Centre (MTC)<sup>23</sup> in Beito, a port township on the island of Tarawa. Established in 1967, MTC is a division of the Kiribati Government's Ministry of Employment and Human Resource.<sup>24</sup>

The ongoing crew change problems for Kiribati have seemingly proved too difficult to manage, and in August 2021, I-Kiribati employees received correspondence via email<sup>25</sup> notifying them that Maersk and Hamburg Süd had withdrawn their membership of SPMS. The message articulated the shipping companies' struggle to repatriate crewmembers and confirmed that SPMS had subsequently terminated their contract with the Kiribati government.

In the correspondence with the seafarers, the companies announced they would officially cease engagement with Kiribati's maritime workforce if the situation has not improved by the end of the year.<sup>26</sup> Although this short window of time effectively provided an opportunity to rectify the situation, the government later reported that the border closures had been extended until 31 December 2021.<sup>27</sup>

22 Response from Maersk received via email on 20/09/2021

23 <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/partnership/?p=7942> (accessed on 20/08/2021)

24 <https://www.employment.gov.ki/> (accessed on 27/08/2021)

25 Correspondence seen by HRAS, with a confirmatory request to Maersk pending a response (as at 31 August 2021)

26 <https://www.abc.net.au/radio-australia/programs/pacificbeat/kiribati-sailors-stranded-fiji/13500654> (accessed on 19/08/2021)

27 [https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=214341487331264&id=100718978693516](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=214341487331264&id=100718978693516) (accessed on 26/08/2021)

# Human Rights at Sea

## INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI

With the coming months now critical to securing Kiribati's future in the international maritime industry, the government's apparent reluctance to open the borders has become a source of frustration in the islands. On 26 August 2021, seafarers in Kiribati were joined by wives, families and friends of those overseas to march peacefully to Parliament House, where Parliament was in session. They pleaded with the government to repatriate the I-Kiribati nationals stranded on foreign shores and secure the nation's future in seafaring.<sup>28</sup>

## Crew Impact: Interviews with Brisbane Crew Representatives

Among the 39 I-Kiribati seafarers staying in Brisbane are four individuals who volunteered to share their experiences and concerns as seamen directly impacted by the crew change crisis. Although each story is unique, several consistent themes were identified from their recollections. These include financial challenges and restrictions; apprehension regarding their futures as maritime workers; and above all, a desperate concern for the welfare of their young families while separated from them.

Each of these individuals volunteered to partake in an interview with HRAS through MtS Brisbane, and have their names published. They have willingly provided personal photos of themselves and their families, and have given explicit permission for HRAS to release them.

### Rokai

*"It's very hard and very sad. But what can I do? In the pandemic, there's nothing we can do. We just wait."*



28 <https://www.thedcn.com.au/news/staffing-crewing-and-training/kiribatis-future-in-shipping-threatened-by-agreement-breakdown/> (accessed on 10/09/2021)



# Human Rights at Sea

## INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI

Rokai, 32, is an Able-bodied Seaman employed by German shipping company Leonhardt & Blumberg. When Rokai left his vessel, HANSA FREYBURG, it was to travel home to Kiribati. However, the timing of his repatriation coincided with a sudden influx of COVID-19 cases in Fiji, and the subsequent tightening of travel restrictions. His journey was cut short when he reached Australia. He has not seen his family in 18 months.

**“The first time I got off my ship, I was very excited because I thought I was going home. But it became very bad because we were faced with COVID-19, so we have no idea if we’re staying here for a long time. There is nothing we can do because of this pandemic.”**

“When I was here in the quarantine centre [in Australia], at that time we had no idea [what would happen] because COVID-19 was getting worse in Fiji. That’s why Fiji closed the border. Kiribati closed the border also because the only way to get to Tarawa is through Fiji. There is only that way. Now, there is no chance [we can get back] because Coronavirus is getting worse in Fiji.”

Rokai has a wife and a young son, who was just two years old when Rokai was last at home. He is now four years old and recognises his father’s voice because of his regular phone calls.

Rokai’s work contract has expired, but because he is still stranded in a hotel overseas, his employer is paying his living expenses and a modest wage until he can return home. He is grateful for what he is receiving but notes that it isn’t enough to support a family who continues to rely on this income.

“We’re still receiving payments, but not much. It’s only basic, but it’s better than nothing.”

“For me, it’s quite enough, but we need more. It’s okay for my family, but to me, I don’t think they can survive on that money. They cannot survive for a long time because the payment only comes through every month.”

Rokai hopes the shipping company will increase the payments because he has no way of knowing how long he will be in Australia. He said there will come a time when the money will no longer be enough for his family.

Aside from financial hardship, Rokai and his family are feeling the full weight of their separation and the amount of time since they were last together.

**“It’s hard for me and also for them because they want me to come back. I want to go back and see them as well because I miss them also. I miss them so much because I haven’t seen them for a long time. For me it’s very hard and very sad. But what can I do? In the pandemic, there’s nothing we can do. We just wait.”**

“Sometimes you feel bad, sometimes you feel depressed. I don’t know about the others, but for me, that’s what I think – you feel stressed like this because you’re only here inside your room and cannot go out sometimes, because also here [we have lockdowns]. But for me, I feel bad sometimes. I don’t know how I can explain for you, but I think you know.”

# Human Rights at Sea

## INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI

“We want to push our government to repatriate us fast, but we cannot push them because they [don’t allow] repatriation. I know because I’ve stayed here for a long time, and I want to go back. I just wait and pray for the time.”

As the arrangement between SPMS and the Kiribati government deteriorates, seafarers such as Rokai are confronted by the likelihood that their careers at sea are coming to an end, if not have been ended by the current situation.

**“As we know, no more I-Kiribati seamen will be working on ships when the pandemic ends. It feels sad because that’s our only job. We cannot find any more jobs besides that because that’s the one we’ve worked for. And now I-Kiribati seamen are no more. It’s very bad. We don’t know how long [it will be for].**

“When you work as a seaman overseas, the government takes a revenue also, because we always send money back and the government takes revenue from us. We pay tax.

“Our government is very strict about the pandemic and that’s why it stopped going to our country. That’s why no more seamen can go and work. But I don’t understand. For me, I cannot explain it more because I don’t understand why our government stopped the people going overseas for work.

“Our government always only talks about and explains about the pandemic because they cannot go to work. But I hear now they’re making progress in [vaccinating seafarers], but I don’t know how long it will take. Once [the workers] have their last dose of vaccine, then sometimes they can go and work overseas. But now, we still don’t know. We still have not heard about seamen going out. Not yet.”

## Taitiuea Reeve



*“It’s a pain. It’s a headache. I think that when we get home, if this pandemic keeps going, we’re going to lose our jobs.”*



# Human Rights at Sea

## INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI

Taitiuea - known to his friends as Reevi - is a steward onboard the MONTE ROSA, a container ship operated by Maersk Line. The 36-year-old father of two has not seen his family in ten months.

Reevi's story begins in October of 2020, after several months of waiting to fly out of Kiribati, to join his ship in the Port of Brisbane. When he arrived on board, it was in the midst of a crisis characterised by border closures and no shore leave for exhausted seafarers.

**“I think the first thing on our minds is always, when we join the ship, we don't have any place to go ashore anymore as seafarers, because every country has restricted seafarers from having shore leave. You're still working every day from morning till evening, and it's like you are in a prison. Getting off from the ship is always the first thing on our mind that we're always waiting for.”**

When the MONTE ROSA returned to Brisbane, Reevi and his I-Kiribati colleagues were directed off their ship and transferred to hotel quarantine. The quarantine period has ended, but he remains in the hotel, unable to fly home. Because these transitions took place within Reevi's contractual work term, he continues to receive wages from Maersk.

“I think that all of the payments from the company are because we should be home at this time. Now they pay everything: quarantine, expenses, and now again we are staying outside of quarantine and they're still paying. I think this is a lot more expensive than it would be if we were home already. I think the company tried to provide everything for us as some of us have been here for almost four months already. But it's not only here in Australia; it's also in Fiji, and some in Europe. They're still paying us, but now only the basic wages. We lose some more money for overtime.

“We were supposed to be on the ship this month as well because we should have spent ten months on the ship. The company tried to relieve us a little bit earlier so we could use this time for quarantine, and then we could be ready before the flights open to our country. That's why we lose a little bit of money during these three months. We're getting less money because the company relieved us earlier.”

Reevi is able to track his wages through an online portal. Although the money can be used and withdrawn, some of his colleagues in Australia don't have a card and are unable to access their funds.

“That's why all of us are now short of money, because we cannot access and sometimes it takes a long time to go to the bank.”

Reevi doesn't spend his money himself, as he has left his card with his family in Kiribati. He has a wife and two children, one of whom has a disability which prevents her from walking and talking.

“If there is a shortage of money, that money is always reserved for my daughter. That's why, for me now, I don't have my card. I always leave it with my wife because any time she wants the money extra outside of her account, she can access my account. That's why I don't bring this card.”

Reevi said that his current income is scarcely enough to support his family, particularly with the expenses related to his daughter's care.

# Human Rights at Sea

INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE  
ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI

**“I was afraid that, when I got off the ship, my money was getting very low. Now, I think it’s not enough, because now I try to cut everything I need, so I just give the money to my family to use now. Before when I was on the ship, we could buy things for the kids during this time, but we can’t buy any more things to make the kids happy. They just buy food because they have to. Budgeting is the main thing we do with this money because it’s not really enough.”**

“My son’s birthday is coming in this month. I hope he will get maybe only one cake, but that’s all. No presents or anything like this. If I was there already, I would work a little bit more, like fishing and getting some other kind of food that we can get, and then we could use some money to buy the kids presents for their birthday. But now, those things will slip away a little bit.

**“It’s a pain in my heart that I cannot be there though this time. My family is getting stressed a little bit because of financial issues. Sometimes they want to buy things, and I say, ‘Don’t buy these things, because this is not a need. They are just wants. Try to minimise your spending, because otherwise you will run out of money until next month, and we cannot afford that. Try not to buy things you don’t need.’”**

The financial uncertainty is a source of stress for Reevi and his family, as is the possibility that he will likely lose his job as a seafarer once he manages to get home.

**“That’s the big issue we have in our heads. It’s a pain. It’s a headache. I think that when we get home, if this pandemic keeps going, we’re going to lose our jobs.”**

“The seafarers from Kiribati are a little bit more expensive because we are far from the places where the companies can recruit other crews. I think it’s a little bit unlikely that the Kiribati crew will be recruited again during this time, because they see that if they take crews from [closer countries], it costs a small amount of money for them to join the ship. But for us, we have to come through Fiji or Australia.

“[Losing my job] is what I’m afraid of. I will have to look for some part-time jobs in Tarawa. I know that we’ll get a small amount of money, and I think it will be only for food or only for [my daughter].”

## Ang George

**“The biggest thing I worry about is my family, and if someone will feed them when my salary stops.”**

Ang George, 32, has been away from home for ten months. As a new seafarer, he had been enthusiastic about his future in the industry, but with less than a month until his contract expires, the excitement has been overshadowed by apprehension. He works in the engine department onboard MV RIO BRAVO, a Maersk Line container ship.

Ang is making himself comfortable in Brisbane and tries to take care of himself by exercising in the hotel. He has been here for a month, but many of his colleagues who have been here longer are struggling to cope.



# Human Rights at Sea

## INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI

**“When I talk to them, they want to go home. They miss their families and their loved ones, especially for those who are couples. For those who are single, they miss their families. They really want to go home. We are struggling with this situation, because some of us have stayed here longer, for more than one-and-a-half years.”**

Ang expressed his gratitude to Maersk for continuing to pay him despite having left his ship early. He hopes that he will keep receiving wages until he can be reunited with his family, but as his contract expiry date approaches, he is concerned that his income may stop.

**“One thing I worry about is what will happen when my contract expires, I don’t know what is next. I don’t know if Maersk will continue to pay me or stop my salary. But when I talk to my colleagues who have stayed longer here, they tell me that money will keep being paid until they arrive in Kiribati, and then they will stop being paid.**

**“But [I also worry about] when the companies change their minds to stop our salaries, that I will have to stay in Brisbane or in Fiji until further notice. Our country is still in lockdown, and we still don’t know when they will open the border for us. The biggest thing I worry about is my family, and if someone will feed them when my salary stops. I am worried about my kids’ education, and if someone will support them because their father is far away from them.”**



Ang is married and has two children. His eldest son is eight years old and his youngest is six. As a father, he wants to provide for his family financially, but he also wants to offer support by coming home and caring for them. They call each other three times a day.

**“They miss me! When I call them, they ask, ‘Daddy, what day do you come home?’ And I say, ‘Okay, be patient guys, maybe a few months and then I can come home.’ They miss me. And also my loved one, she misses me too. I miss them as well.”**

# Human Rights at Sea

## INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI

When Ang eventually returns to his family in Kiribati, he will likely have to search for a new job locally, as it is unlikely that he will be employed by an international shipping company again.

“This is the serious problem. I don’t know if we will be allowed to work on board again or not.

“When I can return to Kiribati, I can find another job. Perhaps I can find a way to support my family and care for my kids’ education. I can find a part-time job before the COVID-19 pandemic is back to normal. And then I can continue my work as a seafarer, maybe in local shipping in my country.

**“I request for my government to open the border, because we’ve spent a long time in quarantine to get back to our country.”**

### Family Impact Statement

#### Ruti (Ang’s Wife)

“Ang George is my lovely husband. He is the eldest son in his family. We marriage in the year 2012 after he graduated from high school in 2010. We have two kids. Our first son is 8 years old and the second son is 6 years old. My husband started his career on the 8th of August 2013 in the local business company (wholesales) in our island Tarawa, Betio, as it’s known in history (World War II). He spent 4.5 years working in the local company in the position of the Out-island Salesman. He was sale out the items from one island to another by the vessel.

On the 18th of June 2018, he joined the maritime school and spent 18 months for his training. During this long period of time, we were struggle because I have no job. I started a small business such as making candies and snacks to sale out in order to support our family need and especially our kid’s education. On the 13th of December 2019, he graduated from the Marine Training Center (MTC).

Last year on the 15th of October 2020, he leaved me and my kids to join the SPMS shipping agent to start a new career on MV RIO BRAVO in the Maersk Shipping Company. This is the first time to separate like this. I mean; he far away from us and I don’t know what time to come home during this Global Pandemic because our border lockdown until further notice. However, our families rely on him for everything they need, like education and support.

Lastly, I hope the job will be back to normal in order to give a lot of opportunities for the Kiribati Seafarers for the next generation.

# Human Rights at Sea

INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE  
ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI

## Tekaiti Tobiro

*“The problem is our country is afraid of us... It’s better if we’re vaccinated, and then maybe they can deal with us.”*

Tekaiti, 29, became a seafarer in 2014. He is an Able-bodied Seaman onboard the RIO DE JANEIRO, a container ship operated by Maersk Line. He has not seen his wife and two daughters in eight months.

“We spent almost six months on board, because the company could not keep us there. They knew the situation in our country because it was closed down. They wanted us to go off the vessel early because they had a plan for us to stay in Australia before going directly back home. But now, we have no idea what time we’ll go. Now I’m almost two months in Australia.

**“We’re feeling depressed. We go on board just to support our families from the money we get. The companies sent us earlier so we could reach home, but because of the pandemic our whole country is closed down.”**

Tekaiti is still receiving payment from Maersk, as his ten-month contract has not yet expired. Although his salary is secured for the next two months, he is not sure what will happen once he reaches the end of his contract.

“At the moment, we don’t know [what will happen to our payment]. If they cut off the pay for us, we don’t know how we’re going to support our families back home. That’s why I’m trying to control the spending for my family, for their needs and wants.”

In addition to these financial challenges, Tekaiti faces uncertainty regarding future employment as a seafarer. This is of particular concern as he genuinely enjoys his work and doesn’t want to lose a job he has worked hard for.

**“There’s a bad feeling for all of us now that all Kiribati seafarers on board the Maersk vessels have been deported. They are staying in Europe and parts of Asia. We are also worried about our careers for the next generation. We don’t know if we’re going back to sea or staying at home. That’s a big question for all of us.**

“From my side, this is the career that I want. I don’t want to get other jobs and go to college, as I am a father, and I need to support my kids. From this money that I get here, I try to save for when I go back home - if we’re going home. That’s why I like this seafarer career. There’s nothing else for me.”

While Tekaiti waits to be repatriated, his family is living with his cousins in Kiribati.

**“Sometimes my wife finds it difficult. It’s really hard for her because she was alone while taking care of our children. She also feels depressed. They’re always asking, ‘When are you coming back?’ Everything is difficult for us.**

# Human Rights at Sea

INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE  
ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI



“For my wife, it is difficult for her to look after the kids, because they are going to school. It is difficult for her to take care of herself. I talk to my wife about making a budget for what they want, but they just live at a limit. Because who knows when the company will stop paying us? That’s why I was asking my wife to control everything for their needs and wants for daily life.”

One of Tekaiti’s biggest concerns is that he and his colleagues have not yet been vaccinated. Without vaccinations, they are unable to return to their island.

“We’d like to be vaccinated. We’ve been here for two months, and we’re still not vaccinated. That’s our request.

**“The problem is our country is afraid of us. For me also, I don’t want to carry the virus into our country. That’s why they still close the border. It’s better if we’re vaccinated, and then maybe they can deal with us.”**



# Human Rights at Sea

INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE  
ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI

## GLOBAL UPDATE ON I-KIRIBATI CREWMEMBERS

Brisbane crew leader and spokesperson Bwerentetaake Toanuea is in frequent contact with the leaders of I-Kiribati crews stranded in Fiji, Germany, Indonesia and South Korea. He receives regular updates on their respective circumstances and general welfare and has identified a common theme in their situations. At the time of the interview, another group of I-Kiribati seafarers was stranded in Spain.

**“The seafarers staying in Jakarta told me they feel so lonely. They feel afraid. The Delta variant in Indonesia is getting worse and they still cannot get the vaccine as well in Indonesia. They need the non-government organisation to give them support there while staying in Jakarta, but at the moment, they cannot contact any organisation in Jakarta.**

“They’re always calling us from Jakarta to tell us what is going on there. They say, ‘You are lucky, you are in Brisbane, there are lots of organisations there that can give support while you are staying in Brisbane. But us here in Jakarta, no one can give [help] to us, to treat us well and take us somewhere, because the Delta variant here in Jakarta is getting worse.’

“They say they feel afraid to go out to walk around. They always stay in their hotel. They say there are 12 of them in the hotel and there’s nothing they can do there.

“They asked us if there is a plan for them to reach Brisbane as soon as possible. But with us, there’s nothing we can do. We just say, ‘Why don’t you contact your company, ask if they can arrange anything for early repatriation flights for you from Jakarta to Brisbane?’ They say, ‘There’s no information from our company. They will let us stay here in Jakarta until further notice.’ I don’t know how long they will stay there in Jakarta. They say staying in Brisbane is better for them; better than staying in Jakarta.

“We always contact our colleagues who are stuck in Spain as well. And what we hear from them is the same story as their colleagues stuck in Jakarta. It’s the same story they tell us: ‘There’s no organisation or anyone from the Seafarers’ Centre to come over to see us while staying in Spain.

**“They have the same feeling, those who are staying in Spain and those who are staying in Jakarta, and those also who are staying in South Korea.”**

# Human Rights at Sea

INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE  
ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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The following three recommendations with supporting explanations have been proposed by the Mission to Seafarers, Brisbane, in concert with HRAS. They align with the Mission to Seafarers' position as a leading maritime welfare charity in the Port of Brisbane, where the organisation works directly with, and cares for seafarers whether aboard a ship or ashore. The Mission to Seafarers' work with seafarers since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the need for an elevated level of welfare services to support these isolated 'key-workers'. The proposed solutions reflect Australia's, and potentially New Zealand's, position in the Pacific, but also aim to secure a better future for Kiribati's seafaring workforce in the international maritime arena.

### 1. Repatriation

**Australia and New Zealand should become instrumental in establishing suitable systems and protocols in conjunction with the Kiribati government to manage the safe repatriation of I-Kiribati seafarers.**

Given its strong ties with the Pacific Nations, Australia and New Zealand are geographically and structurally placed to become a hub for seafarers traveling to and from the Pacific Islands. With full quarantine and isolation facilities already available and mature health protocols to manage COVID-19 vaccination and testing, it is only a short extension to repatriate these key workers back to Tarawa via charter flight.

Australia's eastern state of Queensland has established and proven health protocols for seafarer repatriation management, having arranged the safe repatriation of more than 10,000 seafarers since the beginning of COVID-19. The state government agencies of Queensland Health and Maritime Safety Queensland are in a unique position to become leaders in facilitating the full repatriation of I-Kiribati seafarers.

The level of urgency to develop and enact a solution along these lines is growing daily at the time of writing. In the short term, repatriation will deliver these seafarers home to their families and communities. In the future, this stability will assist in developing sustainable employment strategies that support the ongoing economic future of Kiribati and create a safe corridor for I-Kiribati seafarers to continue their employment on international trading vessels.

### 2. Future Employment in the Pacific Agriculture Industry

**Australia and New Zealand should establish 'green lanes' with the Kiribati government to facilitate alternative employment opportunities in the Pacific agriculture industry.**

The current employment of I-Kiribati citizens as seafarers has had significant benefits for the island nation. These benefits are now severely compromised by the stance the government has initially, and

# Human Rights at Sea

## INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI

understandably, taken towards its border control. While the full social and economic impact of these restrictions have yet to be recognised, the risk of ignoring the impact and delaying a response will be significant.

The nation has traditional connections to seafaring, but existing alternative employment arrangements within the Pacific Islands have delivered similar social and economic benefits. In both Australia and New Zealand, labour mobility and seasonal worker programmes exist, both recognising the Kiribati people. As both Australia and New Zealand rely heavily on seaborne trade, their recognition of this issue for Kiribati's seafarers and ultimately their government should escalate the need to assist this nation in averting a social and economic human crisis.

Australia and New Zealand cooperating to establish 'green lanes' with the Kiribati government to facilitate a COVID-19 safe travel arrangement, utilising displaced Kiribati seafarers, will assist in offsetting the loss of employment and related benefits while maintaining positive benefits for these workers, their families and their communities. This recommendation may be considered an interim measure while future employment stability in the maritime industry is further investigated.

### 3. Future Employment in the Pacific Maritime Industry

**A COVID-19 safe travel bubble between the Pacific Islands, Australia and New Zealand should be considered as an alternative to otherwise challenging international crew change systems.**

Many I-Kiribati seafarers working internationally are employed by crewing agencies which specifically work with Pacific Island nations. Their work is now in severe jeopardy, given the impact COVID-19 has had on international travel and the risk to the health to the broader community from potential exposure to those travelling across borders.

An alternative to such significant international travel for these seafarers is required. A COVID-19 safe 'travel bubble' or aptly named 'blue lane' with Australia and New Zealand should be considered.

The Australian Government's Coastal Trading (Revitalising Australian Shipping) Act 2012<sup>29</sup> incorporates legislation that allows for the establishment of the Australian International Shipping Register (AISR).<sup>30</sup> Key features of the AISR include tax exemptions, tax incentives and alternative crewing arrangements. The mixed crew arrangements created significant opportunity for shipping companies to partner with Pacific Island crewing agencies to utilise existing seafarers and training facilities established throughout the region.

An opportunity now exists to revise the Coastal Trading (Revitalising Australian Shipping) Act 2012 to enhance its commercial competitiveness and utilise the AISR to underpin the intent of this legislation, as well as the chance to revitalise, post-COVID-19, a maritime industry which delivers strategic trade security and economic development benefits across the entire Pacific Islands region.

<sup>29</sup> [https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/maritime/business/coastal\\_trading/index.aspx](https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/maritime/business/coastal_trading/index.aspx)

<sup>30</sup> [https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/maritime/business/coastal\\_trading/aisr.aspx](https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/maritime/business/coastal_trading/aisr.aspx)

# Human Rights at Sea

INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE  
ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI

## CONCLUSION

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The crew change crisis has been understood through numbers. With the assessed seafaring work force of 1.7 million seafarers globally, up to 400,000 of them have been trapped at sea, with some working more than 18 months away from home. The magnitude of the crisis has largely overshadowed the reality that every number has a name, and every name has a story. HRAS, in close cooperation with the Mission to Seafarers, Brisbane, Australia and other welfare providers, has aimed to consider not only the 251 I-Kiribati seafarers still stranded on foreign shores, but the stories and experiences of those individuals, and their families and colleagues at home.

This case study and insight briefing note has aimed to demonstrate the complexity of Kiribati's situation. It has explored some of the greatest challenges faced by the I-Kiribati seafaring community and has highlighted the urgency of their repatriation. By articulating the desperation of their circumstances, HRAS and MtS Brisbane have laid potential foundations for recommended and practical solutions which have been proposed to provide I-Kiribati seafarers a safe passage home, a potential future in the international shipping industry and in the alternative, other viable employment opportunities.



# Human Rights at Sea

INDEPENDENT CASE REVIEW & INSIGHT BRIEFING NOTE  
ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF SEAFARING IN KIRIBATI



## THE DEUTSCHE SEEMANNSMISSION AND THE SEAFARERS' CHARITY



"The Deutsche Seemannsmission (DSM) is an internationally active, independent diaconal organisation of the Evangelical Church in Germany which campaigns for the dignity of seafarers of all nations. They supported the Kiribati seafarers who stayed at the DSM's seafarers' hostels in Hamburg. Although food, accommodation and wages were paid by the shipping companies, DSM, together with Stella Maris, took care of their broader welfare needs, including Wi-Fi, SIM cards, warm clothes and activities. They also provided mental health support.

In March 2021, after 5 months in Denmark and Hamburg, approx. 167 of the seafarers left for home but first had to undertake 14 days in a strict quarantine in Fiji. However, the quarantine facilities were overcrowded, toilets were insufficient for the numbers and general hygiene facilities were also described as very poor; which caused many seafarers to fall ill. One seafarer was 'unwell'. It was thought he had heart issues, so the police were called but refused to take the seafarer to hospital as he was "infectious and in quarantine". A doctor arrived an hour later, but it was then too late: unfortunately, this seafarer died of a heart attack.

No Kiribati seafarers in Fiji quarantine have been paid since arriving in Fiji in March as they are considered to be in 'home quarantine', thus out of the contractual obligation of their employers. In June 2021 the Deutsche Seemannsmission brought the plight of these seafarers to the attention of The Seafarers' Charity. The Seafarers' Charity raised the case with the International Chamber of Shipping and the shipping company agreed to provide further essential support for the seafarers in quarantine in Fiji.

With the Kiribati border expected to remain closed until 31 December 2021, these 165 seafarers remain stranded in quarantine in Fiji.

The Seafarers' Charity have awarded a grant of US\$130,000/£95,000 to Deutsche Seemannsmission to provide financial support to the 165 seafarers stranded in Fiji. US\$50,000 of the grant will be used to purchase fresh food, drinking water, toiletries and other items (e.g. SIM cards) based on a calculation of US\$5.040 per day per seafarer for a 2 month period.

US\$80,000 will support the families back in Kiribati. This allows US\$533.33 per family over 2 months - as a contribution towards supplying basic foods and a contribution towards children's school fees.

The ITF and ITF Seafarers' Trust have also provided support to these seafarers. Additional support influencing decision makers is underway to help get the seafarers out of quarantine in Fiji and back home to Kiribati. However, the situation between the seafarers in Fiji and the Kiribati Government currently remains one of deadlock."



## MAERSK STATEMENT:

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“Unfortunately, during the COVID-19 pandemic our seafaring colleagues from Kiribati have been unable to return to their families and homeland as well as unable to move freely internationally due to restrictions introduced by the Kiribati government and local authorities. The unexpected unwillingness to cater for repatriation has created many serious problems for our Kiribati colleagues and families as well as our own operations. Maersk is fully committed to abide by the Maritime Labour Convention as well as safeguard the well-being of our seafarers, why we have worked extensively and in good faith since the beginning of the outbreak to secure a permanent and acceptable solution for our Kiribati colleagues. Sadly, and to our disappointment, our efforts with local government and authorities have not produced a successful outcome. As a result, and in order to safeguard our colleagues from a potential tightening of either national, regional or global travel restrictions, we had to make the decision to repatriate all our seafarers from Kiribati and freeze the enlistment of Kiribati nationals. As consequence, we are no longer participating in the partnership between Kiribati, New Zealand and South Pacific Marine Services. This has been communicated to all relevant parties. Naturally, we will ensure that our colleagues from Kiribati are well taken care of in their return to their homeland. In the meantime, I’m pleased to share that none of our seafarers from Kiribati are overdue ref the ILO MLC.”

# Who We Are

## BACKGROUND

Human Rights at Sea was established in April 2014. It was founded as an initiative to explore issues of maritime human rights development, review associated policies and legislation, and to undertake independent investigation of abuses at sea. It rapidly grew beyond all expectations and for reasons of governance it became a registered charity under the UK Charity Commission in 2015.

Today, the charity is an established, regulated and independent registered non-profit organisation based on the south coast of the United Kingdom. It undertakes **R**esearch, **A**dvocacy, **I**nvestigation and **L**obbying specifically for human rights issues in the maritime environment, including contributing to support for the human element that underpins the global maritime and fishing industries.

The charity works internationally with all individuals, commercial and maritime community organisations that have similar objectives as ourselves, including all the principal maritime welfare organisations.

## OUR MISSION

To explicitly raise awareness, implementation and accountability of human rights provisions throughout the maritime environment, especially where they are currently absent, ignored or being abused.



## STAY IN CONTACT



We welcome any questions, comments or suggestions. Please send your feedback to:  
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Email: [enquiries@humanrightsatsea.org](mailto:enquiries@humanrightsatsea.org)



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## Human Rights at Sea Independent Case Review & Insight Briefing Note

## Addressing the Future of Seafaring in Kiribati

Human Rights at Sea is a Registered Charity in England and Wales No. 1161673. The organisation has been independently developed for the benefit of the international community for matters and issues concerning human rights in the maritime environment. Its aim is to explicitly raise awareness, implementation and accountability of human rights provisions throughout the maritime environment, especially where they are currently absent, ignored or being abused.

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