

1700GMT, 2 March 2026

These Frequently Asked Questions reflect the current security environment following Operation Epic Fury (United States) and Operation Roaring Lion (Israel), and subsequent Iranian retaliatory strikes affecting the wider region, including Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and regional assets linked to the NATO defensive alliance.

It is intended to provide background and context of international maritime law, trade union guidance, and official maritime security advisories current as of 2 March 2026.

Are seafarers currently operating in a conflict or warlike environment in the affected region?

The official designation of a warlike operations area or High-Risk Area is yet to happen. Nautilus International and other maritime trade Unions affiliated to both the Nautilus Federation and to the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), are actively pushing for urgent meetings of the relevant fora domestically and internationally.

However, many authoritative maritime security bodies have confirmed significant military activity across the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, North Arabian Sea, and Strait of Hormuz, including missile, drone and projectile strikes near commercial shipping.

The UK Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) Centre, has issued multiple incident reports and warnings, confirming attacks on vessels off Oman and the UAE and advising mariners of elevated risks and electronic interference.

In parallel, the U.S. Maritime Administration issued Maritime Advisory 2026 001A, warning of military operations and potential retaliatory strikes by Iranian forces and recommending vessels keep clear of affected areas where possible.

Do seafarers have the right to refuse to sail into these areas?

Yes, when they are declared Warlike or High Risk. Under the International Labour Organization (ILO) Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (MLC), seafarers have an unqualified right to repatriation if a vessel is bound for a war zone to which the seafarer does not consent.

There is no provision in the MLC allowing this right to be suspended due to commercial pressure or operational necessity.

Trade unions, including a number of those affiliated to the Nautilus Federation, have explicitly reaffirmed that seafarers must not be compelled to enter warlike or high-risk zones and must be able to refuse without fear of penalty.

What if the vessel is already in the conflict or high-risk zone?

The right to safety and repatriation does not disappear once a vessel has entered a designated area. Where hostilities escalate, routes change, or new military activity emerges:

- Seafarers may withdraw consent to continue the voyage if the situation materially changes or becomes more dangerous.
- The shipowner remains responsible for safe disembarkation and repatriation as soon as practicable, taking account of port access, crew safety, and international restrictions.
- Seafarers must continue to receive wages and contractual benefits until repatriation is completed.

Being “already onboard” or “already in the region” does not negate MLC protections. Consent must be ongoing and informed, not assumed.

What happens if a seafarer refuses to continue sailing in a high-risk or warlike area?

If a refusal is based on genuine safety concerns linked to conflict or war risk:

- The seafarer must not face disciplinary action, dismissal, or loss of wages
- The shipowner is responsible for repatriation at no cost to the seafarer.
- Contractual clauses cannot lawfully override these protections where the MLC applies.

These principles are reinforced by union guidance and MLC; however, the designation of a Warlike Operations Area or High-risk area is required to have these rights assured.

Are these areas formally designated as “warlike operations areas”?

Insurers and maritime security bodies are moving to classify much of the region as war-risk or high-risk.

The ITF and its affiliates - including a number of Nautilus Federation affiliates - are seeking urgent meetings on formal recognition of the Strait of Hormuz, Gulf of Oman and adjacent waters as Warlike Operations Areas (WOAs), which would automatically trigger enhanced pay, insurance and protections under many collective agreements.

Regardless of formal designation, MLC rights apply whenever a voyage involves war zone risks.

Are seafarers entitled to additional pay if they do sail?

Often, yes. Where vessels enter areas designated as high-risk or warlike under collective bargaining agreements:

- Seafarers may be entitled to risk or danger pay, sometimes at enhanced or double rates.
- Additional compensation may apply for injury, disability or death.

These entitlements depend on the applicable collective agreement which may refer to a national agreement between unions and shipowners, or one agreed internationally dependent on the terms of the specific CBA.

Seafarer safety and choice will always be prioritised over financial considerations when entering negotiations with shipowners regarding war-like or high-risk areas.

What information must shipowners provide to crews before and during operations in the region?

Shipowners and masters must ensure seafarers are fully and promptly informed of:

- Known and emerging security risks and recent incidents.
- Changes to routing, ports of call, insurance status, or operational instructions.
- Any airspace closures, flight suspensions, or restrictions that may affect crew changes or emergency evacuation.
- Available support, including the right to refuse a voyage, pause a voyage, or request repatriation.

Failure to provide accurate and updated risk information may itself breach MLC obligations.

How do airspace closures affect seafarers' rights?

Widespread or sudden airspace closures across the affected region have a direct impact on crew changes and repatriation. Importantly airspace restrictions do not suspend the right to repatriation.

If immediate repatriation is not possible, or is disrupted due to flight cancellations, flight bans or airport closures, shipowners must:

- Keep seafarers safe, accommodated and paid until travel becomes possible.
- Meet reasonable personal travel and subsistence costs, accommodation and necessary medical costs.
- Actively seek alternative routing, ports, or modes of transport.

Extended confinement onboard due to airspace closures may raise fatigue, mental health and welfare concerns, which shipowners are obliged to address.

Seafarers should not be pressured to remain onboard indefinitely because air travel is difficult or costly.

Repatriation rights remain active until seafarers reach their final agreed repatriation destination.

What rights do seafarers have regarding crew welfare during conflict?

Armed conflict and heightened security risk place exceptional physical and psychological strain on seafarers. Shipowners' welfare obligations increase rather than diminish in such circumstances.

Under the MLC and related guidance, seafarers are entitled to:

- Safe living and working conditions, including enhanced watchkeeping arrangements and reasonable adjustments to duties where risk levels are high.
- Fatigue management, including adequate rest hours and relief where prolonged tension, rerouting, or extended voyages undermine fitness for duty.
- Mental health and welfare support, recognising anxiety, stress, and trauma associated with operating under threat of attack.
- Regular communication with families where possible, particularly during periods of heightened danger or extended deployment.
- Access to medical care, including mental health support, on the same basis as physical injury.

Crew welfare must not be subordinated to commercial pressures. Failure to address fatigue, stress, or welfare concerns may itself constitute a breach of safety and labour obligations.

What practical protections exist while ships are operating in the region?

Seafarers should expect:

- Compliance with UKMTO and other voluntary reporting and incident response procedures.
- Access to emergency communication and guidance via UKMTO and naval coordination mechanisms.
- Measures to mitigate electronic interference and navigational disruption, as highlighted in current UKMTO advisories.
- Compliance and adherence to any industry guidance including the latest edition of [Best Management Practices – Maritime Security](#).

What if a vessel is attacked, damaged, or detained?

International humanitarian law applicable at sea requires parties to armed conflict to protect civilians, including seafarers, and to respect neutral shipping. Seafarers retain rights to:

- Medical care and support.
- Continued payment of wages.
- Repatriation once it is safe and practicable, even if a vessel is damaged, delayed or detained.

What support can seafarers seek if their rights are not respected?

Seafarers may:

- Raise concerns onboard through the MLC onboard complaints procedure.
- Contact their Nautilus Federation-affiliated trade union.
- Seek assistance from flag state or port state authorities under the MLC enforcement regime.

Serious or repeated breaches may result in detention of the vessel by port state control.

What is the core principle seafarers should remember right now?

As a number of Nautilus Federation affiliates have stated, *seafarers are not expendable*. They must not be treated as collateral damage in geopolitical conflict.

Safety, informed consent, ongoing consent, crew welfare, and the right to repatriation are fundamental and legally protected, even amid intense regional military escalation.