

SHADOW FLEET SAFETY GUIDE

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR SEAFARERS, FAMILIES, AND CREWING COMPANIES



Introduction

This guide equips seafarers and their families with practical steps to stay safe when dealing with vessels that operate outside international rules—often called the ‘shadow fleet.’ These ships frequently evade sanctions, change flags, and lack proper maintenance, creating serious safety and welfare risks. Understanding how to identify these ships helps protect seafarers and enables crewing companies to make safer placement decisions.



Spotting the warning signs

Identifying vessels linked to the shadow fleet requires close cooperation between seafarers and crewing companies. Before accepting any assignment, verify the vessel's IMO number against official sanctions and risk lists. Look for these indicators:

Vessel Characteristics

- Significantly older vessels, particularly where there are visible signs of poor maintenance or neglect.
- Frequent changes in ownership or management
- Rapid or repeated flag changes
- Not appearing on recognised Port State Control MoUs (Paris, Tokyo, USCG)

Operational Patterns

- Unusual or high-risk trading routes
- No clear management, insurance or P&I entry
- AIS switched off or transmitting false positions
- Ship-to-ship (STS) cargo transfers offshore

High-Risk Registries

If registered under unofficial or suspicious registries, as shown on page 5, the vessel is likely sanctioned.

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What's at stake for you?

Work on a sanctioned vessel can bring serious safety, welfare and legal consequences.

Safety Risks

Non-compliance with SOLAS, IMO or class requirements increases the likelihood of mechanical failures, collisions or pollution incidents. Trading patterns may place the vessel and crew in high-risk or conflict regions where military strikes against merchant vessels have occurred.

Welfare Risks

Higher chance of unpaid wages, delayed payments, or total abandonment. Living conditions may fall below minimum standards, with reports of bullying, intimidation, withheld phones, poor food quality, restricted communication and very limited or no shore leave.

Mental Health Risks

Isolation, uncertainty and lack of contact with family can lead to depression, anxiety and other mental-health challenges.

Legal Risks

Seizure, detention or impoundment by authorities.



Safety checks

Safer recruitment and pre-joining checks

Before signing any contract, seafarers and crewing companies should:

- Confirm compliance with MLC, SOLAS and IMO standards
- Ensure contract lists wages, overtime, leave, and repatriation terms
- Verify wage payment systems and insurance coverage
- Check ownership history, PSC records and AIS behaviour
- Ensure emergency contact details are available (ITF, ISWAN, CHIRP)
- Encourage families to keep vessel details recorded at home
- Carry an emergency SIM card

If you are already onboard

- Prioritise personal safety; do not confront those in control
- Discreetly inform family or trusted organisations (Union, ISWAN, CHIRP)
- Carry an emergency SIM card
- Document unsafe conditions if safe to do so
- Contact ITF or national authority if wages stop
- Arrange to leave safely at earliest opportunity

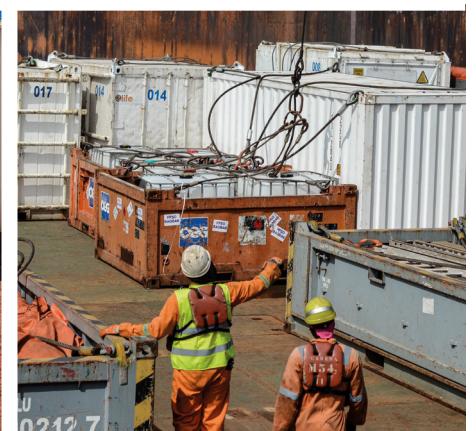
Resources

www.equasis.org

A free website where registration is required and contains a wealth of information on the owner, the last PSC inspection, history, etc.

www.igpandi.org

To check whether a vessel is covered by a P&I club that is a member of the IOGP.



Support for families

- Maintain regular communication through multiple channels
- If affordable, set aside some money every month to build an emergency fund in case wages stop
- Use agreed code words for discreet alerts
- Act quickly if communication stops or wages are delayed
- Seek help from ITF, ISWAN or CHIRP
- Provide emotional support and stay informed

Emergency contacts

Organisation	Website
ITF Seafarers' Support	https://www.itfseafarers.org/en/contact-us
CHIRP Maritime	https://www.chirp.co.uk/maritime/submit-a-report/
ISWAN	https://www.iswan.org.uk/get-support/seafarers/
Befrienders Worldwide	https://befrienders.org/befrienders-worldwide-seafarers/



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