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Op-Ed: Tide is Turning on Maritime Corruption, But We Must Finish the Job

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The maritime industry is notoriously susceptible to the virus of corruption. However, after spending a year as member of the Maritime Anti-Corruption Network (MACN), I believe we are starting to see signs that concerted action is beginning to pay off. It is now becoming better understood that the layers of bureaucracy that surround a ship in port - up to seven industry organizations and seven government bodies - can no longer be exploited with impunity.

The MACN can take large credit for this. Founded in 2011, its work has gathered pace in the last five years in particular. It now has 220 members, including ship owners representing a quarter of global tonnage. In addition, regulators such as flag states like ourselves are adding ballast to the campaign. Far from being a paper tiger, this is giving the MACN teeth evidenced by the now 65,000 anonymous incident reports detailing first-hand accounts of corrupt demands across more than 1,300 ports. This includes more than 5000 bribery reports in 2023.

Having the ability to report incidents anonymously is vital to encourage senior officers to blow the whistle on the totally unacceptable pressures they are put under. For too long, ship captains have had to endure threatening behavior to pay a bribe or benefit in kind to get their ships and cargos in and out of port on time, facing for example bogus inspections or detentions. For shippers grappling with daily charter rates and severe financial consequences for delays, their options have previously been limited.

The nonchalant culture of corruption has been so endemic in some countries we have heard of receipts for bribes being handed out signed by the culprit. Not any longer. This kind of casual crime is now perfect evidence, and ship captains are now more aware than ever they have the power to push back, with the MACN ready to raise the alarm with government agencies. By reporting incidents, the MACN can work with port and customs officials, NGOs, local businesses and governments to highlight areas of corruption risk and take collective action.

The MACN has set up 'collective action' projects in countries where the problems have been most acute, starting in Nigeria more than 10 years ago and replicating the model in India, Argentina, Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Malaysia, Ukraine, Pakistan and Ghana. This is yielding results.

For example, the Isle of Man Ship Registry and MACN recently contacted the heads of four Government departments in one of the collective action countries to lobby for consistent processes and procedures on seafarer immigration. This is enabling us to speed up seafarers repatriation, slashing bogus red tape.

Seafarer immigration is a vital area. In data compiled by MACN, vessel captains reported:

- 7% of all reported corruption incidents at ports over the last decade involved the Immigration Service.
- In 2024 10% of reported incidents to MACN have implicated immigration services.
- Of the 19 possible reasons cited for these incidents, 50% of cases allege "Improper documentation for crew members."
- 58% of these incidents are reportedly resolved through bribery, predominantly involving large cash payments.

More broadly, the MACN's work has seen reductions in demands for payments in the Suez Canal, new regulations in Argentina that make it more difficult for officials to demand bribes and improved ease of operations in Nigerian ports, with the implementation of standardized operating procedures. [...] Getting the Suez Canal Authority to attend shows the MACN's growing leverage to bring key players to the table. This followed India's former director general of Shipping Deepak Shetty, speaking at an MACN's event in Mumbai in 2023. Shetty has joined MACN as an advisor, opening doors to senior-level stakeholders across India's public and private sectors. All signs the noose is tightening.

[...] At the IMO headquarters in London, the MACN is sharing its data around Port State Control Inspections, highlighting weaknesses and potential risks. As an industry we must get behind the MACN's campaign at this top level to maintain and increase the pressure on countries prone to corruption. If we let up, it sends a message to corrupt officials that we as an industry are prepared to turn a blind eye, opening the floodgates to yet more kickbacks, phony inspections and bogus detentions. Seafarers are on the frontline of this awful behavior, making their job harder and more stressful. We owe it to them to give them the tools to defend themselves.

The MACN calculates maritime corruption is increasing the cost of transport and logistics by 15 percent, costing more than \$162 million a year and hurting companies and jobs. If the corruption culture is stamped out, that cash could be retained in shipping lines and maritime businesses to create jobs and growth. And that is something worth fighting for.

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