

China cancels crew change quarantine against Covid-19

Since the end of December 2022, China has adopted a series of measures to relieve Covid-19 control, which include those that will have an impact on ships that call China. Since 8 January 2023, it was formally announced that no more quarantine is required for crew change at Chinese ports.

PCR test report for newly joining crewmembers is no longer required

As the members recall, since September 2020, if a ship has changed crew at the last port of call before arrival in China or within 14 days before arrival in China, the newly joined crew members should obtain PCR negative test reports when joining the vessel. Since then, there have been cases from time to time where a ship encounters problem to get into a Chinese port because the PCR test report doesn't meet with relevant requirements.

From 12 December 2022, according to the 12th version of Guidance on Crew Covid-19 Prevention and Control issued by China MSA, such PCR test report for newly joining crewmembers is no longer required. Some points related to international vessels are interpreted as follows.

1. Seafarers' COVID-19 test results will not be required before vessels calling.

Given the scope of vessels are not specified, vessels on international voyages shall be included herein.

In addition, according to the 12th Guidelines, the following information still needs to be submitted before berthing.

- (a) Ports of call, berthing/unberthing information within the preceding 14 days before vessel's arrival.
- (b) Crew's general information and health condition. Crew changes, embarkation and disembarkation personnel, materials and supplies delivery and personnel contact during berthing.
- (c) Ship's quarantine and epidemic prevention measures.
- (d) Sewage treatment plant and ballast water management system.
- (e) Reefer containers and refrigerated cargo in bulk.

- (f) Disinfection and transfer of garbage from ships.
2. Loading or discharging operation can only be proceeded in a safe manner on the premise that vessel accepted quarantine by the Customs, obtained quarantine certification materials and letters of commitment for crews' health condition were submitted by the shipping company or its agent.
 3. Port operation for domestic trade will no longer restrict port operation personnel to board the ship or ship's crew to enter the port operation area. However, for ships on international voyages, the measures of "avoiding unnecessary embarkation" by port operation personnel and "avoiding unnecessary disembarkation" by ship's crew shall be adopted. Crews are prohibited from entering foreign trade port operation areas. Ship-to-shore interaction of ships on international voyages is under strict control, and the ship's crew shall not disembark except for the necessities of life and production and in emergencies.

Local customs gradually stops to conduct PCR test on crewmembers upon ships' arrival

During the pandemic, local customs at various Chinese ports may, at their discretion, conduct PCR tests to part of or whole crew on board the ship. Since 2020, there have been a lot of cases involving positive crew members who would either be asked to sail away with the ship or be disembarked for treatment or quarantine before cargo operation could be commenced.

Since December 2022, local customs have gradually stopped conducting PCR test on crewmembers, so there have been very few, if not none at all, positive crewmember cases.

Official announcement on ease of crew change restrictions

On 8 January 2023, China's Ministry of Transport, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Health Commission, General Administration of Customs, National Immigration Administration and National Bureau of Disease Control and Prevention have jointly issued the notice for relaxing crew change management from 8 January 2023.

According to the notice, changes or disembarking of crew from international voyage vessels at domestic ports will not need to undertake tests for Covid-19, as well as ending a requirement for quarantine. Crew member from international-going vessels who are planning to complete a change at domestic ports only needs to do Covid-19 test 48-hours ahead of departure from the last port of call before entering into China. The healthy seafarers will not be quarantined and are free to leave and go home directly.

The notice provides, inter alia, the following key terms:-

1. Crew change of international sailing vessels no longer need prior approval of local authorities. The procedures will be the same as before the pandemic, i.e. inspection of border control as well as issuance of temporary entry permit, etc.
2. Crew members who are to sign off in China no longer need to be quarantined or receive PCR test upon arrival at China. If the health declaration is normal and the customs' routine check finds no abnormality, the crew members can move freely. If there is any abnormality, the customs will decide on measures to be taken depending on the situation.

3. Crew members who are to come to China for crew disembarkation, should receive PCR test within 48 hours before the ship leaves the last foreign port. If tested positive, the crew members should be treated locally. If there is indeed difficulty in arranging PCR test because of itinerary, antigen test result is also acceptable.

Surveyors' attendance on board will become possible gradually

During the pandemic, in most Chinese ports, surveyors were either not allowed to attend on board, or need to be quarantined for a certain period of time after attending on board international sailing ships.

Following the latest notice, some ports such as Shanghai, Qingdao, Dalian, etc. have changed their policy on this, namely, boarding permit can now be applied following normal procedures as before the pandemic, and no quarantine will be required after the surveyor's attendance on board. Currently, not all ports have implemented this change, though it is anticipated to spread to more and more ports soon.

Owners and operators are always recommended to check with the local agent for the latest requirement and information in case of need.