Thousands face coronavirus disaster on cruise ships as governments close their ports

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On Monday Holland America Line (HAL) president Orlando Ashford, referring to the nearly ten thousand cruise ship passengers still currently stranded at sea worldwide, called the current situation facing the cruise industry "a humanitarian crisis," on the company website's blog. His statement was directed specifically toward the case of MS Zaandam and the MS Rotterdam, which until Thursday afternoon had been stranded at sea with four reported deaths, eight individuals testing positive for COVID-19, and nearly 200 reporting flu-like symptoms.

According to a March 27 report by the *Guardian*, HAL ships the Zaandam and the Rotterdam were among "at least 10 ships around the world still stuck at sea after having been turned away from their destination ports in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic." The report stated that it had identified "five ships in the Americas that were unable to unload nearly 6,000 passengers. At least three other ships were having trouble off the coast of Australia, including one which sought urgent medical attention for an outbreak of respiratory illness. Two more ships were trying to get passengers to ports in Italy."

Sailing from Buenos Aires, Argentina on March 7, the Zaandam had originally been scheduled to disembark passengers in Santiago, Chile, on March 21. On Monday, March 16, Chile, as well as several other South American countries in which the ship had been scheduled to dock, announced the closing of their borders to international travel. While stranded off the coast of South America, the ship underwent an outbreak of flulike symptoms, beginning with 13 guests and 29 crew reporting feeling ill to the ship's medical facilities.

HAL subsequently announced that it would reroute the course of the Zaandam to head to Fort Lauderdale, Florida for March 30, with the intention of disembarking its guests. As the onboard outbreak intensified, and concerns over the lack of COVID-19 tests available on board increased, the company arranged for the Zaandam to rendezvous with its sister ship, the MS Rotterdam, off the coast of Panama, where it would receive additional supplies and support, as well as coronavirus testing kits.

Since testing began on the Zaandam, nine passengers have been confirmed to have contracted the virus and two have died.

While HAL initially announced "a plan to transfer groups of healthy Zaandam guests to the Rotterdam," Ashford later clarified that "the intention is for these two ships to work in tandem to try to protect the health of those that are healthy, and so that we can create room and space [to] care for the ones that are sick."

After some deliberation, with some uncertainty as to whether both ships would be allowed to cross the Panama canal, the Panamanian government eventually announced that it would facilitate the Zaandam and Rotterdam's passage and trans-ship operations, but forbade any passengers or crew to enter the country, in order to "safeguard the health of Panamanians," a Reuters report said. After the successful rendezvous, the two ships proceeded to Fort Lauderdale's Port Everglades.

On Sunday, the US Department of Homeland Security and the United States Coast Guard released a Marine Safety Information Bulletin (MSIB) stating that "medical facilities in the Port of Miami, for example, are no longer accepting MEDEVAC [medical evacuation] patients due to limited hospital capacity and it is expected that neighboring counties will follow suit."

The next day, Republican Florida governor Ron DeSantis gave a callous and xenophobic televised statement to Fox News, in which he condemned the cruise ships seeking safe harbor in Florida. "It'd be really bad if new infections were just being airdropped in from other hotspots," he said. "A lot of these are foreigners […] We cannot afford to have people who are not even Floridians dumped into south Florida, using up […] those valuable resources. We view this as a big, big problem."

Although President Donald Trump asked the Florida governor to rescind his opposition to cruise ships docking in the state, stating, "I'm going to do what's right for, not only us but for humanity," no measures have been taken as of yet

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to reverse the Coast Guard's decision.

In compliance with the MSIB, any of the ill passengers from the Zaandam will remain on the ship "for an indefinite period of time." Following further directives as outlined by the bulletin, HAL made private hospital and transportation arrangements for the ill who have tested positive with COVID-19, and those who are in critical condition. Additionally, it was not until Thursday morning that it was announced that the ships would be allowed to dock, and healthy passengers and crew permitted to travel home via privately chartered travel arrangements organized by the company.

The response of the US Coast Guard and Governor DeSantis sparked an outpouring of popular condemnation, as evidenced by a Twitter user's comment that was accompanied by the hashtags #letZaandamDock and #letRotterdamDock: "The way these people are being treated is appalling. Please allow them to dock so they can return home to loved ones." Another commenter wrote, "This is immoral. My 90 year old grandfather is on that cruise, a retired GP who dedicated his life to helping others when they were ill. Why will nobody help them?" Another user stated, "Shame on Florida Gov. Rick DeSantis for actively trying to get the Zaandam cruise ship diverted away from Florida. We are Americans. We don't turn our backs on people in need, regardless of the risks."

The "humanitarian crisis" facing the cruise ship industry is far greater in scope than that outlined by Ashford on Monday. In addition to the approximately ten thousand cruise ship customers still stranded worldwide, there are many more ships with just their crews on board being denied entry into ports of call.

As of this Thursday, at least eight cruise ships containing no passengers, but thousands of crew members have been stranded off the coast of Sydney, Australia. On March 15, the Australian government under Liberal Party Prime Minister Scott Morrison stated that these crew-occupied ships would not be allowed to release their crew in Australia.

Among these vessels, which include the Ruby Princess (Princess Cruise Line/PCL), Ovation of the Seas and Voyager of the Seas (Royal Caribbean Cruise Line/RCCL), Spirit and Splendor (Carnival Cruise Line/CCL) and the Solstice (Celebrity Cruises), there have been hundreds of reported confirmed cases of COVID-19 onboard.

While the Morrison government has made tremendously hypocritical gestures toward its intention to fulfill "maritime obligations to protect the welfare of seafarers," it is singlehandedly responsible for the disaster faced by thousands of ship employees.

While the national Australian Border Force (ABF) has given minimal support to ships for crew members only in critical health conditions, the Australian federal government has denied the repatriation of thousands of workers, many of whom face rapidly deteriorating circumstances on board. After the ABF mistakenly allowed nearly 2,700 potentially infected passengers to disembark from the Ruby Princess in Sydney Harbor on March 19th, the federal government responded by shifting the responsibility for docking vessels onto local governments.

There are several other crew-only ships around the world that have reported confirmed cases of COVID-19 on board, including the Celebrity Eclipse and Infinity, Anthem, Navigator, Oasis, and Symphony of the Seas (RCCL), as well as the Coral Princess (PCL), to name a few. An Indonesian crew member aboard the Marella Dream died on March 27 with symptoms that were consistent with that of COVID-19 but was unable to be tested for the virus. It is highly likely that additional tens of thousands of stranded ship workers stand to be endangered by the shipboard spread of the coronavirus, as well as by the inability of national and local governments to adequately address the crisis.

Reporting to Cruise Law News, a crew advocacy group, an anonymous crew member on the Ruby Princess stated, "Crew are terrified. No solid information, only pep talks broadcast by Hotel Director. [Senior Captain of Fleet] made an angry announcement as crew were not following isolation [protocol], saying no port would allow ship to dock in present condition and it would be months before crew would see their families. […] No idea how many actually have Covid but MANY have symptoms including lack of taste and smell."

Other cruise ship workers report horrifying conditions aboard stranded vessels, including quarantine in rooms with no sunlight or windows as well as inadequate air flow and internet access, minimal information from the officers, insufficient disease testing, isolation and containment measures, as well as gag orders and pressures not to speak to anyone about the conditions they face on board. There is little doubt that as governments worldwide, and particularly in the United States, fail to address the catastrophe facing the cruise ship industry, thousands more ship workers and passengers will become ill and potentially lose their lives.

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