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Vessels from China breaching 14-day travel ban raise coronavirus fears

Maritime workers fear they are being put at risk of exposure to the deadly coronavirus as a result of the arrival of container vessels from mainland China, which in some cases are docking in breach of the Federal Government's 14-day travel ban.

Workers at Melbourne's Webb Dock were alarmed following the arrival of the Hong Kong-flagged Cosco Thailand container vessel. An inspector from the Maritime Union of Australia was initially told it had sailed from another Australian port, but it was subsequently discovered that the vessel had actually departed Ningbo in mainland China.

Coronavirus warning signage has now been installed on the gangway, with access to the vessel limited, visitors required to wear face masks at all times, and maritime workers warned not to shake hands with the crew.

In Darwin, workers demanded a delay to the planned docking of the Singapore-flagged Kota Nebula yesterday, with the vessel having departed a port in mainland China on February 3.

While the Australian Government has imposed a ban on foreign nationals entering Australia "for 14 days from the time they have left or transited through mainland China", the Kota Nebula was granted permission to dock in Darwin just 11 days after its last potential coronavirus exposure.

The Cosco Thailand was likewise allowed to dock less than 14 days after departing China, with workers, including pilots, tugboat crews, linesmen, and other port workers coming into direct contact with the crew of the vessel without being made aware of the potential risk of coronavirus exposure.

The Maritime Union of Australia said both incidents highlight the failure of the Australian Government's self-reporting system, which relies on shipping companies disclosing potential coronavirus risks and untrained seafarers identifying possible infections.

"The Australian Government has imposed strict travel restrictions that prevent air travel by anyone who has been in mainland China in the previous 14 days, yet these vessels are being allowed to dock less than a fortnight after leaving Chinese ports," MUA National Secretary Paddy Crumlin said.

"The reason for the 14 day travel ban is that the incubation period for the coronavirus is two weeks, so it is completely possible that crew members from these vessels may be infected but not yet show symptoms.

"Local maritime workers, including those who board the vessel to pilot them into port and those working to unload them, are all being put at unacceptable risk of exposure through the decisions to allow these vessels to dock in breach of the travel ban.

"The broader community are also being put at risk by the failure to implement proper quarantine measures for commercial vessels, which provides a direct route by which this disease could enter Australia.

"There have been numerous confirmed cases of coronavirus among seafarers departing China, which is why it is so important that this vessel not be permitted to dock."

Mr Crumlin said it was alarming that the Australian Government was still relying on merchant vessels self-declaring any biosecurity threats, including suspected coronavirus cases.

"The Australian Government sat on its hands for weeks following the outbreak, saying virtually nothing about one of the most vulnerable biosecurity areas: ports and shipping," he said.

"Despite the Health Department finally putting out guidance, including additional measures for vessels that departed mainland China from February 1, these rules are not being enforced.

"What measures are occurring appear to be driven by individual port management, rather than a coordinated national biosecurity response.

"The failure to implement one of the most important guidelines — a 14 day exclusion for people departing mainland China — is placing the local maritime and transport workforce at risk, and by extension the general public.

"Merchant vessels don't have doctors on board, and we are not seeing health checks being undertaken by Australian authorities before they dock, meaning the identification of this major health threat is being left to untrained seafarers.

"The Australian Government needs to urgently rectify this situation, enforce the requirement that any vessel that has departed China wait 14 days before docking in Australia, and conduct proper health checks on all crew before they make contact with any Australian maritime workers.

"The Australian public deserve to know that biosecurity on our maritime borders is being exercised properly and transparently, providing the protection they need from this growing pandemic."

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