



MERCHANT NAVY WELFARE BOARD

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The Right Honourable Priti Patel MP
Secretary of State for the Home Department
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

2 August 2022

Dear Ms Patel,

Urgent action needed to abolish transit visas

The Merchant Navy Welfare Board (MNWB), the umbrella organisation for charities that provides welfare services to merchant seafarers and fishers within the UK, is formally recognised by the UK Government as the National Seafarers' Welfare Board, in accordance with ILO Maritime Labour Convention, 2006.

It is within this capacity I am writing to you today to raise our serious concerns about the use of transit visas within the UK fishing industry. We understand that transit visas are designed for seafarers transiting through the UK to reach their departing ship. They are unsuitable for foreign fishers working on UK-based fishing vessels. In many cases, these fishing vessels operate to and from a single UK port and lack many basic labour protections in respect of pay and working hours.

Transit visas also trigger a further injustice for those fishers who have been subjected to racial and physical abuse to become helpless victims of modern-day slavery, supported in a new piece of research by the University of Nottingham Rights Lab: [Letting Exploitation off the Hook? Evidencing Labour Abuses in UK Fishing](#). This report sought the views of fishing crew about what it is really like to work within the UK fishing industry.

With the help of frontline welfare charities, migrant fishers seek protection and support from the police and other statutory authorities as they enter the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). This allows their allegations and circumstances to be assessed, appropriate support provided, and a decision made as to whether they should be granted discretionary leave to remain in the UK while an investigation takes place.

Understandably, having come to the UK to work, foreign fishers in the NRM would like to be able to work during the period while their cases are being assessed. Unfortunately, though, their transit visa is not a work visa and does not entitle them to work in the UK. This differs from foreign nationals employed as fruit pickers on a domestic visa and being subjected to slavery who can work while in the NRM.

The MNWB is strongly urging the UK Government to abolish transit visas and replace them with a specific visa regime that acknowledges our need in the UK fishing industry. This view is shared by Conservative MP Nusrat Ghani as outlined in a recent opinion piece in Politics Home.

In addition, the MNWB urges the Home Office to remedy the injustice of foreign fishers being unable to work while in the NRM as this means that they are stripped of their dignity twice, once by the skipper who exploited them, and secondly by the UK's immigration system. This will not change unless urgent action is taken - and we need your help to combat this problem.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Sharon Coveney,
Deputy Chief Executive, MNWB