



International Cable Protection Committee Ltd.

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ICPC Calls on Governments and Industry to Facilitate and Expedite Submarine Cable Installation and Repair During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Order to Protect Internet Connectivity and Critical Communications

The International Cable Protection Committee (ICPC) calls on governments and industry to facilitate and expedite the deployment, operation, and repair of submarine fibre optic cables during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to protect increasingly important broadband Internet connectivity and the governance, health, education, and commerce activities that depend on such connectivity.

Submarine cables are critical Internet infrastructure. Even before the pandemic started, submarine cables (not satellites) carried approximately 99% of the world's Internet, voice, and data traffic, including backhaul of mobile network traffic and data for credit card and electronic payments. Governments have therefore been long treating submarine cables as critical infrastructure.

Continuing installation and repair during the pandemic are vital. Submarine cables have now assumed even greater importance for governments, businesses, educational institutions, and individuals and families by supporting electronic and online engagement that help minimise disease exposure and transmission, including:

- Communication of government policies and public health information for COVID-19
- Telework and online meetings for business and government agency personnel, particularly video conferencing
- Electronic commerce, for online purchases for sustenance, medicine, and critical supplies
- Tele-medicine for COVID-19 and other health issues
- Tele-education while school and university campuses remain closed
- Communications with family members and friends by voice, video, photos, and messages
- Entertainment to ease the stresses of home quarantine and self-isolation

The ICPC estimates that Internet traffic has increased between 25% and 50%, depending on geographic region, since November 2019, and will surely increase further. Speedy repair of existing submarine cables (which are most commonly damaged by ship anchors and fishing nets) and construction of new submarine cables to meet massive increases in Internet traffic are necessary to avoid service disruption, degradation, and slower speeds—which would impair government, health, education, and commerce activities.

Need for continuing cross-border operations. Installation and repair of submarine cables requires not only the continued manufacture of such cables, but also the continued movement of personnel, equipment, cable ships, survey ships, and guard/support vessels across borders and maritime zones and through ports to perform sophisticated installation and repair. Most of the world depends on foreign-flagged cable and survey ships with expert multi-national crews to install and maintain submarine cables.

Specific measures recommended. Governments and industry should therefore adopt and implement the following measures—which reflect national and International Maritime Organization (IMO) best practices—to facilitate submarine cable installation and repair while safeguarding public health.

- **General measures**

- Provide accreditation (credentialing if necessary) of, and access for, submarine cable industry personnel on land and on ships to ensure they are not unreasonably confined or detained
- Designate submarine cable manufacturing, installation, and repair, including related ship-based activities, as essential economic activities authorised to operate under even the most stringent shelter-in-place and border and port controls
- Designate submarine cable industry personnel, regardless of nationality—including manufacturing, seafarer, and marine personnel—and port personnel—as essential employees authorized to work and travel
- Permit importation, transport, and sale of otherwise unrestricted telecommunications network equipment, spare plant, and repair tools, including items stored in bonded warehouses
- Expedite licences and permits, and grant temporary waivers, to speed installation of new submarine cables and repairs of existing ones
- Continue to enforce cable protection laws and measures to minimise the risk of cable damage and disruption of communications in the first instance

- **Access to ports and maritime zones**
 - Ensure that visiting cable ships, survey ships, and guard/support vessels continue to have access to berths in port, and that quarantine restrictions are not imposed on the ships themselves
 - Suspend—or grant waivers of—cabotage restrictions on cable ships to permit time-sensitive installations and repairs without regard to the cable ship’s flag state

- **Facilitation of crew changes and personnel access**
 - Exempt seafarers, marine personnel, and technical personnel from national travel or movement restrictions in order to facilitate their joining or leaving ships and their performance of land-based installation and repair work
 - Authorise seafarers and marine personnel to disembark ships in port and transit through national territory, such as through an airport, for the purposes of crew changes and repatriation
 - Use testing and screening measures and medical certifications for crew joining or leaving cable ships and personnel performing other land-based work
 - Facilitate the use of dedicated transit/quarantine hotels and vehicles to house and transport crew joining or leaving cable ships or personnel performing other land-based work

- **Facilitation of port access and operations**
 - Communicate COVID-19-related special requirements and pre-arrival information early and effectively to relevant stakeholders
 - Empower customs, immigration, coast guard, and port authorities with sufficient decision-making authority and resources to clear and process loading and unloading of cable systems, spare plant, and vessel equipment and embarkation and disembarkation of crew, consistent with measures to protect personnel of such authorities and of crew
 - Authorise continuing joining and leaving of pilots to ensure safe navigation of visiting cable ships
 - Where possible, permit ship crews to transfer spare cable and components to/from depot storage facilities in lieu of local stevedores avoid the risk of ship’s crew being exposed to COVID-19.

- **Protection of health**
 - Waive where possible port inspections and port visit requirements, in order to minimise transmission and exposure between shore and ship
 - Promote the use of electronic records for ship-to-shore, administrative, and commercial interactions involving ports and ships in order to reduce COVID-19 exposure and transmission risks posed by document handling and interpersonal exchanges
 - Provide information to personnel on basic protective measures against COVID-19

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- Ensure expedited access to testing and public health resources in order to minimize the introduction and spread of COVID-19 in manufacturing facilities, in ports, and on cable ships
- Support use of lodgings in key port areas where crew can be quarantined to monitor their health and ensure they are COVID-19 free before joining a ship.
- Provide personal protective gear, particularly masks and gloves, to personnel who interact with ship officers and crew, such as pilots and customs agents, and monitor and quarantine them as necessary if they show COVID-19 symptoms
- Require that these personnel periodically report their health status and any potential case of COVID-19 infection as early as possible
- Provide personnel with access to emergency medical treatment ashore in the event of medical emergencies

Importance of Tampere Convention principles. In considering the measures recommended above, the ICPC urges states to recognise and abide by the provisions of the Tampere Convention on the Provision of Telecommunication Resources for Disaster Mitigation and Relief Operations (the 'Tampere Convention'), a multilateral treaty adopted to ensure the freedom and access of persons in providing emergency services in disaster situations, including disease pandemics. The Tampere Convention calls on states to 'reduce or remove regulatory barriers to the use of telecommunication resources of disaster mitigation and relief,' including 'regulations restricting the movement of personnel who operate telecommunication equipment or who are essential to its effective use.'

About the ICPC. The International Cable Protection Committee was formed in 1958 and its primary goal is to promote the safeguarding of international submarine cables against man-made and natural hazards. The organisation provides a forum for the exchange of technical, legal and environmental information about submarine cables and, with over 180 Members from over 60 nations, including cable operators, owners, manufacturers, industry service providers, as well as governments, it is the world's premier submarine cable organisation.

For further information about the ICPC's response to COVID-19, please contact:

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