



One Hundred Sixteenth Congress
Committee on Homeland Security
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

April 10, 2020

The Honorable Chad F. Wolf
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Acting Secretary Wolf:

I write to you very concerned over reports that the recent disembarkation of two Holland America cruise ships, the Zaandam and Rotterdam, was chaotic and may have exposed passengers to COVID-19. The failure to disembark in an orderly fashion is especially concerning given the extensive planning by several parties—including multiple Department of Homeland Security (DHS) components—that should have ensured appropriate health and safety procedures.

As you are aware, the Zaandam left Buenos Aires on March 7th with more than 2,400 passengers and crew members on board, including more than 300 Americans. The ship spent weeks at sea as it was denied entry to port after port and increasing numbers of passengers and crew members became sick, with four people losing their lives. To protect the health and safety of those on the Zaandam, the Rotterdam was dispatched to bring supplies and accept the transfer of healthy passengers. After continuous delays, they were granted passage through the Panama Canal and approached Florida waters.

Many worked together to address concerns with allowing the ships to dock and disembark safely in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. DHS told the Committee that its components, including the U.S. Coast Guard, Customs and Border Protection, and the Transportation Security Administration, worked tirelessly with local authorities and Holland America's parent company, Carnival Corporation, to develop a comprehensive plan to ensure an orderly disembarkation of those aboard the ships and limit potential transmission among passengers and crew members. I appreciated their efforts and supported facilitating passage home for those onboard in a manner that would protect public safety appropriately.

Unfortunately, as the plan was put into effect, reports surfaced of huge crowds getting off the ships, filing into crowded shuttle buses and charter flights, waiting together for hours due to delays, and finally dispersing to fly on an untold number of connecting commercial flights with the general public. After days of careful isolation in individual cabins, hundreds of passengers at high risk of COVID-19 were exposed to each other and comingled travelers throughout the

journey. Two of my constituents survived the weeks-long ordeal on the ships with their health intact only to test positive for the coronavirus in the days following the disembarkation.

While DHS components were not the only parties involved in developing these plans, the Department has a responsibility to provide leadership in protecting the American public. This is not the first time an alarming number of people at risk of infection have been crowded together at airports. Most notably, DHS's implementation of the suspension of entry for foreign nationals from the Schengen area resulted in massive crowds at aviation ports of entry that caused delays lasting several hours. DHS must do better.

Effective coordination, communication, and leadership from DHS are imperative to efforts to bring additional travelers home safely. According to the U.S. Coast Guard, more than 100 cruise ships and 90,000 crew members are still stuck at sea in or near U.S. ports, and Americans stranded abroad continue to be repatriated. As DHS works with cruise lines, the travel industry, local authorities, and other stakeholders to develop further plans to facilitate travel, ensuring that Center for Disease Control guidance regarding social distancing is followed to the maximum extent practicable is vital to protecting the public, DHS employees, transportation workers, and the Nation.

Thank you for your attention to this serious matter.

Sincerely,



BENNIE G. THOMPSON
Chairman