

Japan International Transport Institute: Seminar on maritime security measures for Non-SOLAS vessels

Opening address by Efthimios Mitropoulos, Secretary-General of the International Maritime Organization, IMO Headquarters London, 10 May 2005

When a group of terrorists launched their ferocious attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and on other targets in the United States on September 11 2001, they shocked and outraged the entire civilized world. Their actions reverberated around the globe and generated reactions and responses on a scale seldom witnessed in peacetime. The calamitous explosion that was 9/11 sent its shockwaves far and wide and they were felt even in places and in communities that had no obvious direct link with the attacks themselves or with their immediate victims. It was as if, through their actions that day, the terrorists reminded us all of how truly integrated our global society has become, and how much we all rely on each other for our safety and our security.

In a practical sense, one of the clearest lessons that those events, and others in other parts of the world subsequently, brought home to us all was the vulnerability of transport networks and the potential they held to be either the targets or the instruments of terror. In the world of shipping, it became immediately apparent that the entire regulatory framework, and the everyday practices that were defined by it, needed to be thoroughly examined and, if necessary, overhauled.

As the specialized agency of the United Nations responsible for the safety and security of international shipping, IMO was quite properly seen as the forum in which this task should be undertaken; and it was with commendable speed, clarity of vision, unity of purpose and undiminished determination that the Members of this Organization came together to set that daunting yet vital task in train. The spate of subsequent terrorist attacks in Bali, Istanbul, Baghdad, Moscow, Madrid, Beslan and others, too numerous and harrowing to list, confirmed the critical nature of the undertaking.

It was, I think, one of the Organization's most significant achievements when, in December 2002, less than a year after the detailed work on this subject began in earnest, a week-long Conference held here at IMO was able to adopt a comprehensive security regime for international shipping - a regime which, as you know, has redefined the way an entire industry - two, if we count shipping and ports as separate disciplines - goes about the business of ensuring the security of its assets and its people. It introduced, for example, such fundamental concepts as dedicated security officers for ships, shipping companies and port facilities and the need for detailed security plans to be drawn up for ships and ports and for those plans to be approved by Governments.

As it might be expected, given the thoroughness of the new security measures and the time-pressure under which they were developed and adopted, compliance has proved a challenge. But it was a challenge to which Governments and the shipping industry rose with prudence, diligence and fortitude - mindful, no doubt, of the external circumstances that created the need for such a thorough overhaul of existing practices. I am sure you will agree with me that all concerned, including the dedicated IMO staff, deserve credit for that.

As comprehensive and far reaching as they are, the new maritime security measures adopted by IMO apply formally to only one sector, albeit an extremely broad one, of the wider shipping or, more correctly, maritime community. Because they were adopted as amendments to the Safety of Life at Sea Convention, by definition they apply only to ships that come under the auspices of that Convention - essentially passenger ships, cargo ships of 500 gross tons and above that are engaged in international trade, and mobile offshore drilling units.

Although this means that nearly 100 per cent of the world's international merchant fleet is covered, Governments attending the 2002 Conference were very well aware, at the time of adopting the new measures, that the hundreds of thousands of vessels all over the world that are not covered by the SOLAS Convention nonetheless had the potential to pose a significant security threat. Was it not a small craft that launched the attack on the USS '**Cole**' - and another small craft as well that hit the French tanker '**Limburg**'? Indeed, in some cases, the threat of small craft might even be greater than that posed by SOLAS ships. It is undeniable, for example, that the statistical material available on non-SOLAS vessels and, in particular, on their trading patterns, is scarce, which means that even identifying which vessels may pose a particular risk can be a serious problem.

It was only yesterday that a financial newspaper was suggesting that, since that ill-fated day of 11 September, the "global war on terror" has moved from grand themes to the nitty gritty of everyday safety considerations, citing private security; homeland protection; cyberspace; and shipping as key areas where much remains to be done. I believe that tackling, from the security point of view, small non-SOLAS ships clearly is an issue that needs to be addressed. It, therefore, does credit to the wisdom of those participating at the 2002 SOLAS Conference who had the foresight to adopt a resolution encouraging Governments to do just that, and it is in the context of that resolution that this meeting has been convened today.

A host of different factors combine to make establishing effective security measures for non-SOLAS shipping a difficult and complex challenge. The immense diversity of the sector in terms of vessel ownership, different vessel types with a multitude of specific or general purposes, in terms of trading patterns and port facilities used, often compounded by the absence of a formal structure of registration and inspection, suggests that a solution that works in one part of the world may not necessarily meet the requirements of another.

In Japan, for example, from where the initiative for today's meeting has come, a study has revealed significant differences in the characteristics of non-SOLAS shipping activity even between the country's different coastlines.

The study also reveals just how significant the non-SOLAS sector is in terms of numbers: non-SOLAS vessels account for more than 16,000, or some 15 per cent of the annual visits by foreign flag vessels to Japanese ports, while the domestic non-SOLAS fleet includes some 9,000 vessels engaged on domestic voyages only and a huge fleet of some 340,000 fishing vessels. There are some half-a-million craft of less than 20 gross tons.

Project this picture globally, and the scale of the problem seems massive. But that has not prevented several Governments from grasping the issue and beginning to establish their own frameworks, mechanisms and practices for dealing with the security issues surrounding non-SOLAS ships. And I commend them for their initiative.

The Japan International Transport Institute has assembled a most distinguished team of speakers and panellists for this seminar today from a number of Governmental and national authorities that are now actively tackling the problems we will shortly seek solutions to. They have come here ready to share their experiences and their knowledge in this difficult field and to provide a unique insight, each from their own perspective, about what measures, if any, are necessary for certain kinds of ships, about the decisions that have been taken in this regard in Japan and their countries and, above all, about what works and what does not. We recognize and appreciate their contribution.

Before I conclude, I should just like to draw attention, once again, to the background against which this meeting is taking place. The threat of terrorism is not receding. Moreover, we, in the world of shipping, have to consider issues that reach far beyond the immediate consequences of any terrorist attack, however horrific they may be. We have already taken great steps, under the auspices of the SOLAS Convention, towards addressing the question of security for international shipping and are expanding our work to also cover shipping lanes of strategic significance and importance, such as the Malacca Strait. But even a small ship, used strategically and in the right location, at the right time, could have a major disruptive effect on human life, the environment and local, regional and even international trade - so, finding ways to tackle successfully the security question for non-SOLAS shipping is not just a desirable addition to the work already undertaken, it is a vital and necessary component of it.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this short address, terrorism has served to unite us in acknowledging that we can all be its potential victims. Even a single event could have widespread and far-reaching consequences affecting us all, one way or another. We must, therefore, endeavour to ensure that we are, and remain, equally united in our efforts to counter its threat.

So my thanks go to the Japan International Transport Institute and, in particular, its President, Mr. Hanyu and the Nippon Foundation, for taking the initiative to convene, organize and support this meeting; and also to the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport of Japan and the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore for placing the seminar under their auspices. It will, I am sure, help to place these issues in sharper focus and enable us to move towards a common approach to them. Once this is done, a good service will have been rendered to the community; and we will feel satisfied that we have done our duty.

It is, therefore, with great pleasure that I welcome you all to IMO Headquarters, and I have every confidence that the time you spend here today will be of value to you and the maritime world at large. I would like to see this meeting's conclusions and recommendations brought to the attention of our Maritime Safety Committee, which opens its eightieth session tomorrow.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you.