

Give all ships the means to assist in major accidents at sea

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June 3 - 5, the International Maritime Rescue Federation (IMRF) will arrange its second Mass Rescue World Conference in Gothenburg, Sweden. This will gather Sea Rescue Organizations and Governmental Authorities responsible for sea rescue services from all over the world to discuss and deliberate improvements in Mass Rescue Operations at Sea.

The undersigned strongly believe that more lives could be saved if some alterations and improvements in the international requirements regarding Life-Saving Appliances (LSA) were made. We want to add a set of provisions and requirements, which demand that passengers and crew are not only to be evacuated from ships in distress into lifeboats and life rafts, but also in the end are rescued to a place of safety, for example by ships in the vicinity.

The Cruise-Ship industry is rapidly growing. Cruise ships get ever larger and can today carry more than 8000 passengers and crew. In the developed world, passenger shipping is a very safe mode of transportation. However, when an accident actually does occur, it can have devastating consequences with hundreds or thousands of people in need of help. Since these accidents happen so rarely and since there is no way to know where they will happen, it is not realistic to build up Search and Rescue (SAR) capacities that can be relied upon to rescue a large number of persons in the limited time before an accident turns into a disaster.

Today, the chances of getting off a ship in distress are relatively good, but being evacuated to a lifeboat or a life raft does not mean that you are rescued. There is currently a lack of equipment, harmonized systems as well as guidance or regulations concerning how to rescue a large number of survivors out of the water, from lifeboats or in life rafts.

When the IMRF arranges its second Mass Rescue World Conference, the discussions will revolve around how the entire mass rescue operation-chain can become more effective - including how the evacuees shall actually be rescued to a place of safety.

There are more or less established routes on the high seas. This means that there are almost always other ships in the vicinity. When a ship is in distress, other ships will often be at the scene of the accident long before dedicated rescue units arrive. Unfortunately, for different reasons, they often have limited abilities to assist more than just a few persons.

In 1994, the worst civilian ship disaster in modern European history occurred. Although there were 22 ships in the close vicinity when the M/S Estonia sank, only 137 persons survived out of the approximately 1.000 persons on board. Ships that arrived at that scene were forced to improvise. They had neither the equipment nor the routines to participate effectively in such a rescue operation. Instead, in spite of all their efforts, they mostly became witnesses to the tragedy.

After SS Titanic sank 100 years ago, a discussion concerning stricter maritime safety provisions and requirements evolved and led to the first international convention of its kind: SOLAS (International Convention on Safety of Life at Sea). The version now in force is from 1974 with some additional amendments. Chapter III - Life-saving appliances and arrangements, includes requirements for lifeboats, rescue boats and life jackets according to type of ship. One of the Regulations refers to means of rescue for survivors, but it is only applicable to Ro-Ro passenger ships. However, this is not enough for most ships to be able to get large numbers of survivors from the water, from lifeboats or life rafts to a place of safety.

A few years later, the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue was adopted. The SAR-Convention ensures that regardless of where an accident happens there shall always be an organization in a region that can co-ordinate Search and Rescue operations.

The present international regulatory framework for ships focuses primarily on preventing accidents from happening. Secondly, when accidents do occur, regulations aim at ensuring a safe return to port, under the concept "the ship as its own lifeboat". Ultimately, if everything else fails, orderly evacuation is regulated. But there is still a lack of regulations, and as a consequence, equipment and routines to enable the last step of a rescue operation - to actually get large numbers of people, hundreds or thousands, to a place of safety.

There is an obligation for ships to assist other ships in distress, enshrined both in tradition and in the international "Law of the Sea". But as soon as more than a few persons are in need of rescue, this obligation is usually difficult or impossible to fulfil. Ships on the High Seas have a unique, yet not usable capacity to be of assistance in mass rescue operations.

We want to see improvements and new requirements in the international regulations so that the equipment that can be used for evacuation can also be used to rescue people to a place of safety. By equipping ships with hoistable life rafts, a crane for life raft recovery and close range rescue boats to connect the rafts, it would be possible to comply with the proposed requirements. At the same time, ships would be given the ability to fulfil their obligation to assist each other.

Although passenger shipping is a very safe mode of transportation, there is a global lack of ability to handle the rare, large scale accidents at sea.

We need smarter, more functional and goal based solutions and international requirements. But why should the shipping industry wait until another incident occurs and regulators, due to public pressure, have to propose even stricter rules. We must be proactive. A lot can be done before a new disaster happens.

Facts:

The International Maritime Rescue Federation (IMRF) is an international organization with consultative status to the UN's International Maritime Organization (IMO). IMRF represents about 70 of the world's search and rescue organizations.

For the second time, the Swedish Sea Rescue Society (SSRS) is hosting the IMRF's World Conference in Mass Rescue. The conference takes place in Gothenburg between the 3d-5th of June.

Together with Chalmers University of Technology and Stena Line, the Swedish Sea Rescue Society has developed FIRST, a system for improved mass rescue. The basic idea of the system is that any ship that happens to be first on the scene in a mass rescue situation should be able to recover life rafts filled with people by lifting them directly to the safety onboard, without the need to transfer people one by one.

www.ifsm.org

www.sjobefalsforeningen.se

www.ssrs.se

www.international-maritime-rescue.org

www.first-rescue.org

massrescue.tumblr.com

Twitter: @firstsrq, #massrescue

- Ship owners and companies: Install better equipment and introduce better procedures – even if the regulations do not require it. Share knowledge about Mass Rescue Operations with government authorities and non-governmental maritime organizations. Point out the regulatory obstacles and needs.

- Flag States, Port States, Coast States and Government authorities in spiteresponsible for sea rescue services: Lobby for improvements at IMO and adopt proactive international and national requirements and exceptions.

Together within the shipping community and by international co-operation, we can improve the safety for passengers and crews.