

Ref. T2/6.01

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GLOBAL MARITIME DISTRESS AND SAFETY SYSTEM (GMDSS)

Introduction

1 The Sub-Committee on Radiocommunications, at its fortieth session (16 to 20 January 1995), noted that investigations had shown that only a minor proportion of ships had converted to the GMDSS. In response, the Sub-Committee issued COM/Circ.121 which invited Administrations "to strongly recommend to their shipowners and ship operators to take early action to ensure that equipment meeting GMDSS carriage requirements is fitted on their ships well in advance of 1 February 1999".

2 The Sub-Committee on Radiocommunications and Search and Rescue (COMSAR), at its first session (19 to 23 February 1996), noted that the situation had not improved and that only a small percentage of the world's fleet had converted to the GMDSS.

3 The Sub-Committee also noted that manufacturers continue to advise that they will be unable to meet a large surge in demand in 1998 and that early conversion to the GMDSS should be sought.

Phased installation of the GMDSS

4 The Sub-Committee has been advised that in order to assist shipowners and ship operators, some Administrations have developed schemes whereby shipowners and ship operators can adopt a phased programme for the installation of GMDSS equipment. The equipment will be installed and commissioned, but will then be immobilized until the ship is ready to change to the new system.

5 These schemes allow shipowners and ship operators to arrange installation work to coincide with a ship's scheduled stay in port, at the same time spreading the financial burden of equipment purchase, and allowing the manufacturers to spread their manufacturing load over a reasonable period.

6 The GMDSS equipment will not be subject to survey during the period that the ship continues to operate under the old distress system. During this phased installation period, the operation of the ship station must be in accordance with non-GMDSS requirements and not be operationally impaired in any way by the new equipment.

7 During the conversion process, Administrations are advised to issue to the ship documentation explaining the status of the radio installation and the type of certificates carried by the ship and the radio operators.

GMDSS radio operator training

8 Shipowners and ship operators are reminded that in accordance with SOLAS regulation IV/16 - Every ship shall carry personnel qualified for distress and safety radiocommunication purposes to the satisfaction of the Administration. These personnel shall be holders of certificates specified in the Radio Regulations as appropriate, any one of whom shall be designated to have primary responsibility for radiocommunications during distress incidents.

9 Administrations are also reminded that resolution A.769(18) provides procedures and arrangements for issuing GMDSS certificates to holders of non-GMDSS certificates by "limited GMDSS examination". In order to encourage a timely conversion of existing non-GMDSS certificates, it should be borne in mind that the arrangements for "limited GMDSS examination" should cease on 1 February 1997. After this date all candidates should be required to pass the full GMDSS examination.

10 New entrants, or those not wishing to do the "limited GMDSS examination", should be required to pass a full GMDSS General Operator's Certificate (GOC) examination. Purpose designed training courses which incorporate at least the content identified in the IMO GOC model training course should be made available to prepare the candidate for the GOC examination.

11 A significant problem experienced thus far with the implementation of the GMDSS has been the extremely high occurrence of false distress alerts, with the majority of these false alerts attributed to operator incompetence. The lack of adequate mandatory training could be the primary cause of this problem. The STCW Convention was revised in 1995 to increase the minimum standards of competence for the GMDSS GOC and it is extremely important that Administrations implement at least these standards as soon as possible in their examinations for the GOC.

Conclusions

12 Therefore, the Maritime Safety Committee in considering the above matters at its sixty-sixth session (28 May to 6 June 1996), recognized that:

- .1 there is a need to urgently install GMDSS equipment on ships and to train sufficient radio personnel as GMDSS operators;
- .2 shipowners and ship operators should be made aware that Administrations will not grant exemptions from the carriage of GMDSS equipment, other than those provided for under regulation 3 of SOLAS chapter IV, after 1 February 1999; and
- .3 if ships have not installed GMDSS equipment and do not have a passenger ship safety certificate and a form P or cargo ship safety radio certificate and a form R valid for the GMDSS or appropriately certificated radio personnel after 1 February 1999, then such ships could experience considerable delay awaiting the supply of GMDSS equipment and the inability to trade because of non-compliance with the SOLAS or STCW Conventions, or both.

13 Member Governments are invited to bring this circular to the attention of all concerned for information and action, as appropriate.