

World Conference on Disaster Reduction

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Address by Mr Koji Sekimizu, Director, Maritime Safety Division

International Maritime Organization

Ministers, excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

My name is Koji Sekimizu and I am Director of the Maritime Safety Division of the International Maritime Organization, which is the specialized agency of the United Nations responsible for the safety and security of international shipping and the protection of the marine environment from pollution by ships.

Since it began operations in 1959, IMO has established an extensive framework of international conventions, rules, standards and guidelines designed to enhance maritime safety, security and protection of the marine environment and thus prevent maritime accidents and reduce their effects. For example, standards governing the design, construction, operation and manning of ships and the training of seafarers are aimed at preventing accidents, while systems for distress and safety communication, search and rescue, oil and chemical spill preparedness and response are all geared to minimising the effects on people, the environment and property on those relatively infrequent occasions when major accidents do occur.

IMO's environmental agenda also includes work to reduce the impacts of global warming and ozone depletion and to provide special protection to those sea areas that are particularly sensitive in order to preserve the marine environment on which important human activities such as transport, fisheries and tourism depend.

In the context of this conference, it is true to say that, although maritime accidents cannot strictly be termed natural disasters, nevertheless the forces of nature frequently play a part in their causes, and the natural environment is, sadly, often the victim of their effects.

Turning now to IMO's specific response to the tsunami disaster: all of us at IMO joined the rest of the world in expressing our shock and sadness at those dreadful events and I should like to

take this opportunity once again to convey our deepest compassion to all those caught up in this tragedy.

In the immediate aftermath, at the initiative of the IMO Secretary-General, a trust fund has been established at IMO through which the contributions of the Organization and the shipping industry as a whole could be channelled in support of the wider UN efforts. In addition to contributions made through this fund, the shipping industry has been quick to provide aid in kind wherever it can, for example by providing free container space and waiving freight charges for aid consignments to ports in the affected region.

In a joint initiative with the UN Environment Programme, IMO has agreed to send IMO staff to Indonesia to set up an environmental crisis centre to address the environmental dimension of the disaster. We will also be working with other bodies, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization, to carry out missions for needs' assessment in the stricken areas.

Immediate concerns directly within IMO's remit were, firstly, the impact of the tsunami on shipping and the maritime communities; then, an assessment of the extent of the damage to the maritime infrastructure such as lighthouses, navigational buoys and maritime communication centres as the navigational infrastructure too must be swiftly returned to full operational status in order to safeguard maritime transport in the region.

At the invitation of the IMO Secretary-General, officials from IMO, the International Association of Marine Aids to Navigation and Lighthouse Authorities (IALA) and the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) met at IMO headquarters in London last week to discuss our immediate responses to the south Asian tsunami disaster and to agree a joint plan for future actions as the works moves into the recovery and restoration phases.

The three organizations, together with the World Meteorological Organization, are focusing their attention principally on ensuring the integrity of the maritime navigational infrastructure; ensuring the safe navigation of ships, including those carrying urgently needed relief supplies; and assessing what improvements might be made to the promulgation of maritime safety information.

It was agreed at the meeting that the current system for promulgating maritime safety information should be re-evaluated in the light of the tsunami disaster. In terms of the contribution that the maritime community might make to the proposed tsunami early warning system for the Indian

Ocean, it was agreed that the robust and well-proven satellite and radio-based communications infrastructure that IMO has established for the promulgation of maritime safety information to ships has the potential to play an important role in the dissemination of tsunami warnings to ships. We, therefore, pledge our willingness to contribute to the establishment of a tsunami early warning system for the Indian Ocean and other regions, as required.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me finish by thanking the organizers for the opportunity to speak today, and by confirming once again IMO's willingness and readiness to play its part in co-ordinating any activities aiming at ensuring the integrity of the maritime transport system. IMO is committed to reducing the effects of disaster reduction, largely through preventative measures. Moreover, I should like to stress that we stand ready and willing to play our part, within the boundaries of our specialties, and to work with others, in furtherance of the principles of the Yokohama Strategy.

Thank you
