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HONG KONG MERCHANT SHIPPING INFORMATION NOTE

Improper Use of VHF Radio Equipment Onboard Ships for Collision Avoidance

To : Shipowners, Ship Managers, Ship Operators, Masters and Officers

Summary

The collision between a Hong Kong registered vessel and a Chinese registered vessel happened off Zhoushan Qundao, China resulted serious damage to both vessels. This note is to draw the attention of Masters and Officers on the risks of relying solely on the use of VHF radio communication and AIS information for collision avoidance.

The Incident

1. In March 2008, a Hong Kong registered vessel collided with a Chinese registered vessel at a position off the Zhoushan Qundao, China. The visibility was good at the time of collision. Both vessels sustained serious hull damage.

2. The investigation into the accident revealed that:

- the Third Officer of the Hong Kong vessel failed to keep clear of the Chinese vessel being overtaken;
- the Third Officer of the Chinese vessel, being the stand-on vessel, failed to take appropriate actions when he found that the overtaking vessel, which was required to keep out of the way, had not taken appropriate actions in compliance with COLREGS; and
- both Third Officers were not aware of the risks of the actions agreed through VHF radio communication to avoid collision.

Lessons Learnt

3. The Officer of the Watch (OOW) should comply with the requirements of COLREGS in assessing the risk of collision by means of radar plotting or other systematic observations of radar target (e.g. use of ARPA and AIS) rather than relying on agreed actions through the VHF radio. Information exchanged using VHF radio would be scanty, imprecise and misunderstood.

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4. To avoid collision at sea, the requirements of COLRGES must be observed at all time and the avoiding actions should be positive and monitored continuously until the other vessel is finally past and clear.

5. The OOW should notify the Master if there is any doubt in view of the prevailing traffic condition or actions to be taken to avoid collision.

6. VHF radio is commonly used for bridge-to-bridge communication between vessels at sea, however if OOW solely relies on the agreed action without considering the risks of such agreed action may eventually lead to a close quarters situation or collision. The associated risks and precautions when using VHF radio communication for collision avoidance are described in the Annex to this information note.

7. The attention of ship managers, ship operators, masters and officers is drawn to the lessons learnt from this incident.

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