

MARINE DEPARTMENT NOTICE NO. 123 OF 2004

(Navigational and Seamanship Safety Practices)

Notice to Owners, Operators, Masters and Persons -in-charge of Locally Licensed Vessels – Fire in Engine Room

The Accident

On 27 April 2004, a fire broke out in the starboard engine room of a locally licensed motor launch shortly after all passengers had been disembarked at the HKJC Kau Sai Chau Golf Club Sai Kung pier, Sai Kung. Crewmembers attempted to extinguish the fire with portable extinguishers with no success. The fire spread to the main passenger cabin and upper deck and burned out of control. All the 3 crewmembers abandoned the vessel. The burning vessel drifted to the nearby Sai Kung Public Pier, where staff of the Fire Services Department extinguished the fire. As a result of the fire, the starboard engine room was badly damaged and the entire superstructure of the vessel was burnt away. One crewmember was slightly injured in the incident.

2. Investigation into the accident revealed that the fire was probably caused by an electrical fault, e.g. short circuiting or arcing in loose wiring connections, in the main engine starting control panel in the starboard engine room. The main contributory factor for the spread of the fire to other areas of the vessel was that the crew tried to tackle the fire by opening the access hatches when smoke was discovered coming out from the engine room vents. Other contributory factors included inadequate fire fighting procedures, the lack of fire drills for crewmembers who had recently joined the vessel, as well as the lack of a fixed fire extinguishing system for engine room.

Lessons Learnt

3. Important lessons should be learnt from this incident :
- (a) Specific inspection and maintenance programme should be implemented to prevent the development of electrical faults in the low voltage electrical system on board vessels. All electrical connections should be properly made and fastened to avoid damage by vibration, moisture and heat.

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- (b) Fire fighting instructions should contain appropriate procedures to avoid spreading of fire and endangering safety of personnel when an access door/hatch into a space suspected of being on fire is opened.
- (c) Fire drills should be arranged for new crewmembers as soon as possible to let them be well prepared to handle fire emergency.
- (d) Fixed fire extinguishing system, e.g. CO2 system, is the most efficient and safest means to contain and extinguish engine room fire. It can be designed to suit machinery spaces of all sizes and is especially valuable to protect engine rooms that are normally unmanned and difficult to access.

4. Owners, operators, masters and persons-in-charge of the locally licensed vessels are requested to take note of the above-mentioned accident and the lessons learnt.

S.Y. TSUI
Director of Marine

Marine Department
Government of the HKSAR
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