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World Maritime Day 2000

IMO: Building Maritime Partnerships

A message from the Secretary-General of the International Maritime Organization

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We are now well into the first year of the 21st century and all the concern and fears about systems crashing when we moved from 1999 to 2000 proved to be unfounded. The precautions taken throughout the maritime world to assure that there would be no disruption to shipping were successful and people and goods were moved throughout the oceans and waterways of the world unimpeded. Nevertheless, the occasion provided seafarers and those associated with sea transport the opportunity to reflect on how critical their role is to international commerce.

No matter where you may be in the world, if you look around you it is most probable that you will see something that either has been or will be transported by sea. There is every likelihood that the chair you are sitting on, the paper on which you are reading this message or the radio to which you may be listening or even the clothes you are wearing have something in their content that has been carried on board a ship. The vast majority of people do not give this fact a second thought. And that is how it should be. If the industry that facilitates the world-wide circulation of raw materials and finished products works efficiently and cost-effectively, there is really no reason why the man or woman in the street should be aware of it.

But once a year, on World Maritime Day, we in the shipping industry make an effort to raise its profile by focussing on some of the key themes related to our day-to-day work and bringing them to the attention of a wider audience. This year our theme is "building maritime partnerships," a topic which we feel is highly appropriate for shipping because the industry is at the heart of one of mankind's oldest and most basic partnerships - partnership in trade.

Here at IMO, our responsibility is to be the prime proponent and standard-bearer for a universal culture of safety throughout the maritime world. It is a difficult task because, while shipping is one of the few truly international industries, it is also a fragmented one, with participants coming from every conceivable part of the social, political and economic spectrum. Finding solutions that can embrace them all and still promote the overall objectives of safer ships and cleaner oceans is a daunting task. But the record shows, undeniably, that we have achieved considerable success and confirms that we have the capacity to build on it in the future.

The foundation stone of our success has been partnership. Indeed, partnership is a fundamental principle in IMO which at its heart is a co-operative relationship between the 158 Member Governments, who join together in framing, implementing and policing the standards and the rules and regulations that govern international shipping. It is a partnership that has produced more than 40 conventions and several hundred protocols and resolutions that together provide the blueprint for a safe, environmentally friendly and cost-effective industry.

Of course, we are well aware that this is not the whole story. For many years, we have recognized that the ability to implement rules and regulations is as important, if not more important, than the actual construction of the legislative regime itself. For more than 30 years, therefore, IMO has had a very active technical co-operation programme in place that has been helping those who lack the necessary resources and skills to play their full part in achieving our joint objectives.

That form of assistance is another example of how partnerships can work. And, over the last few years, our focus has been on extending the partnership concept to embrace – even more so than previously - the non-governmental organizations and private sector components that have a direct interest in our industry. Many of these have had links with IMO since its inception.

It is an approach that is becoming increasingly popular throughout the UN system and one to which I personally give my full support. So long as the objectives continue to focus on promoting safety and reducing pollution, I will encourage co-operative arrangements between IMO, individuals and organizations in all sectors.

It is clear that we cannot achieve anything if we try to go it alone. Partnerships are therefore essential but they must also be recognized as a two-way street. Although we fully acknowledge that we need to draw on the technical competence, skills, expertise and knowledge that exist in the commercial world, at the same time a basic principle which I strongly believe in must be accepted and that is that IMO is the right and only place where issues concerning international shipping safety and environmental protection should be considered and adopted. We are in a unique position to provide the necessary guidance, leadership and focus.

Winning private sector support for co-operative initiatives is a tough challenge, because of the large number of worthwhile sometimes competing demands put forward and the consequent need to convince industry that our cause warrants their attention. But I believe most sincerely that, if the shipping industry wants to operate within a sound regulatory framework that is pragmatic, effective and consistently applied, it must - and will – continue to support IMO in its efforts to raise and implement standards globally.

Our experience with the application of the partnership philosophy has been outstanding. It has enabled IMO to undertake joint programmes with governments, labour, shipping and industry organizations which have a maritime interest. Without this form of assistance, the Organization would be unable to fulfil its technical co-operation mandate to provide guidance and support, particularly to developing countries, to enable them to meet the requirements for the proper implementation of international standards in shipping.

Of course, it goes almost without saying that we need more help, more support, more participation and more partnerships. But I don't want this message to be construed as a plea for funding - welcome though it would be. Instead I want to concentrate on the broader implications within the philosophy of partnership.

This year has seen a great deal of media and industry attention focussed on the need to strengthen what has been termed the "safety net" that underpins the safety of international shipping. I make no apology for having personally stirred up some of this attention through the statements and speeches I have made in the wake of recent high-profile shipping accidents.

The safety net itself is nothing more - or perhaps I should say nothing less - than a series of partnerships. It begins with the partnerships between Member Governments here at IMO it moves on to embrace the flag States, the shipbuilders and designers, the classification societies, the port State control inspectors, the charterers, the ship operators themselves and, ultimately, the seafarers who staff and operate the world's fleet. Hydrographers, map-makers, educators, equipment manufacturers, insurers and countless other groups or individuals all have their part to play as well.

At IMO, we are currently engaged in a process by which our Member States can strengthen the relationships within the various infrastructures that will produce tomorrow's seafarers. Panels of experts are currently assessing submissions made by Member Governments detailing how they are implementing the revised STCW Convention. This is a new process which, for the first time, gives IMO a direct involvement in the implementation of a convention. It is undoubtedly a breakthrough and has only been achieved through co-operation, consensus and respect for the competence of the Organization.

Shipping is a modern, international and multi-faceted industry that eventually touches just about everyone on the planet. And there is not a single individual or group involved with shipping that stands alone, outside the network of partnerships. It is fundamental that we all commit to a process of continually re-examining the standards that we have established and the mechanisms we have created for ensuring their proper, uniform implementation. In this, a global industry, our objectives can only be achieved through global partnerships in a global forum.