1. The incident

1.1 At 1218 local time on 29 December 2012, the Hong Kong registered high-speed passenger ferry "Urzela" departed Macau. It was raining with light breeze. The visibility was originally about 4 nautical miles (nm) but deteriorated rapidly to about 0.5nm. It was the vessel’s fourth voyage of the day. Everything was normal for the last three voyages.

1.2 After passing underneath the Macau Friendship Bridge, at 1225, the vessel’s speed was increased to about 35 knots. Before the vessel sailing to pass through the fairway between the No.5 and No.6 buoys in the Macau channel as originally planned, the rain patch appeared in the vicinity and affected the visibility seriously. The chief officer, who was at the wheel, lost the sight of the No.6 buoy for a short while. When the chief officer sighted a buoy ahead again, he assumed it was the No.6 buoy and steered a course to pass the buoy on the starboard side of the vessel.

1.3 Shortly afterwards, Macau Vessel Traffic Service (VTS) alerted Urzela to pay attention to the course. The chief officer realized that the assumed No.6 Buoy was in fact the No.5 Buoy on the starboard bow and the vessel was actually proceeding towards the outer limit of the Macau Channel. He instinctively put the helm to starboard intending to bring the vessel back to the track but the action caused the vessel striking onto the No.5 Buoy at 1227.

1.4 As a result, the bulbous bow of the vessel and the forward strut and foil were damaged. 27 passengers and 4 crewmembers were injured.

1.5 The investigation revealed the following contributory factors to the accident:

- The vessel did not sail at a safe speed under restricted visibility and failed to comply with Rule 19 (Conduct of Vessels in Restricted Visibility) of the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (COLREGS); and

- The vessel’s course and position had not been checked at sufficiently frequent intervals, to ensure the vessel to follow the planned course. Therefore the vessel did not comply with the requirement under 5(2) “Performing the navigational watch” in Part 3 of Schedule 1 of the Merchant Shipping (Seafarers) (Certification and Watchkeeping) Regulation Cap. 478T.
2. Lessons Learnt

The lessons learnt from this incident are:

- At all times the vessel shall comply with the COLREGS, in particular, Rule 19, to proceed at a safe speed appropriate to the prevailing circumstances and conditions.

- During the navigational watch the vessel’s course, position and speed shall be checked at sufficiently frequent intervals, using all available navigational aids.