

The International Maritime Organization

This year is extremely significant for the International Maritime Organization (IMO) as it contains a number of key milestones and anniversaries for the Organization. The 6th of March marked the 60th anniversary of the adoption of the IMO Convention by a conference held in Geneva in 1948 under the auspices of the United Nations; 17 March was the 50th anniversary of that Convention entering into force in 1958; and June saw the 100th session of our Council, the 40-Member executive body of the Organization, which supervises its work between sessions of the Assembly.<P>

The inaugural meeting of the IMO – originally known as the Intergovernmental Maritime Consultative Organization (IMCO) – was held in London in 1959. The main purposes of the Organization, as a specialised agency of the United Nations, are “to provide machinery for co-operation among Governments in the field of governmental regulation and practices relating to technical matters of all kinds affecting shipping engaged in international trade; and to encourage and facilitate the general adoption of the highest practicable standards in matters concerning maritime safety, efficiency of navigation and prevention and control of marine pollution from ships”. The Organization is also empowered to deal with administrative and legal matters related to these purposes and, as its influence has grown, the IMO has also taken on major responsibility for the security of ships and port facilities.

The IMO’s work has demonstrated, beyond doubt, that international standards – developed, agreed, implemented and enforced universally – are the only effective way to regulate such a diverse and truly international industry as shipping.

The Organization’s standards are now firmly embedded in shipping’s consciousness and practice and they shape the industry of today. Indeed, the comprehensive body of IMO conventions (50 in total), supported by literally hundreds of codes, guidelines and recommendations, govern just about every facet of the industry – from the design, construction, equipment and operation of ships to the training of seafarers, or from the drawing board to the scrapyard.

Of particular interest to the hydrographic community, the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) places contracting governments under obligation to collect and compile and disseminate hydrographic data, to ensure that hydrographic surveys are carried out, to ensure the greatest possible uniformity in charts and nautical publications and to co-ordinate their activities to the greatest possible degree in order to ensure that hydrographic and nautical information is made available on a worldwide scale as timely, reliably and unambiguously as possible.

Overall, the development and refinement of IMO measures never stops. For example, and again of particular significance to the hydrographic community, in November/December this year, the IMO’s Maritime Safety Committee will consider draft regulations to make the carriage of electronic chart display and information systems (ECDIS) mandatory. If approved, these regulations could be adopted in May 2009. However, until they enter into force, there remains, for all SOLAS vessels, an obligation to carry an appropriate folio of paper charts.

The strength of IMO measures is derived from a number of factors. First of all, none of them has been developed overnight as a knee-jerk reaction to an accident or incident. Even though some have been prompted by particular events – and the IMO is justifiably proud of its record of timely and appropriate response – nevertheless, all IMO instruments are the result of measured and considered technical work by the brightest minds and the finest maritime expertise available anywhere in the world.

Not only do the Member Governments send their top experts to the IMO’s technical meetings, the process also benefits hugely from the contribution of specialist nongovernmental organisations and intergovernmental organisations. Representing all sectors of the industry, as well as a host of other civil society and geographical interests, these organisations take an active and committed role and their contribution is valued highly. That IMO measures have such a detailed and appropriate technical content is due, in no small measure, to the expert input of these international organisations.

Because of the extensive network of global regulations the IMO has developed and adopted over the years, we can say with confidence that, today, shipping is a safe and secure mode of transport; clean; environmentally friendly; and very energy efficient.

And so, the IMO stands united, focused on the challenges ahead and continuously relevant to the industry it has been serving for so long. Shipping is, par excellence, a significant contributor to, and facilitator of, economic growth on a worldwide basis. As such, the mission of the IMO (that of promoting its safety and security, its efficiency and its environmental credentials) is one that reaches out far beyond the Organization’s immediate constituency and touches the life of nearly everyone on the planet.

