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World Maritime Day: Shipping Safety 100 years after the Titanic

By Sam Bateman

Synopsis

World Maritime Day on Thursday 27 September focuses attention on shipping safety. Much has been achieved over the years but shipping accidents continue to occur and there are no grounds for complacency.

Commentary

TODAY, 27 September, is World Maritime Day. As 2012 marks 100 years since the ill-fated liner Titanic sank in the North Atlantic, the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) decided that the theme for this year should be "IMO: One hundred years after the Titanic".

The Titanic tragedy led to major new measures for maritime safety, including the first International Convention on Safety of Life at Sea and, ultimately, to the establishment of IMO itself. In recent decades, there has been a multitude of international instruments aimed at making shipping safer and more secure. These assorted conventions, regulations and guidelines govern just about every aspect of ship operations and safety.

Human error

Nevertheless, shipping accidents occur all too frequently. Recent high profile accidents include the grounding of the cruise liner Costa Concordia on the Italian coast and the wreck of the container vessel Rena in New Zealand. Earlier this month, the Hong Kong-registered bulk carrier Sunny Horizon collided with the Korean-registered LPG carrier DL Salvia off Singapore leading to major damage to both vessels and a serious oil spill.

Human error remains the key cause of most shipping accidents. This suggests that standards of crew training and efficiency are not what they should be.

To a large extent technological developments and increased regulation have improved ship safety. However some of the checks and balances to ensure ships are operated safely have been eroded, particularly those related to the responsibilities of flag states and ship owners.

While technological developments have benefits they also have costs. Highly computerised bridges enhance the safety of ship operations but can also lead to complacency and lack of situational awareness in watch-keeping personnel. These factors were evident in the accidents involving the Costa Concordia and container vessels. This highlights the challenge for ship owners, flag states and seafarer certifying authorities to ensure

seafarers are appropriately qualified and skilled.

Container Safety

Besides the human element several serious shipping accidents have occurred recently involving undeclared or misdeclared cargo in shipping containers.

Investigation of the contents of containers washed ashore after the container vessel MSC Napoli was wrecked off Britain in 2007 revealed many goods not as declared on cargo manifests.

Some spectacular accidents have resulted from the combustion or explosion of the contents of a container. In March 2006 off the coast of Yemen, the large container ship Hyundai Fortune suffered an explosion and massive fire in its containers as a consequence of incorrectly stowed and declared hazardous cargo. Most recently in the North Atlantic, another container vessel, the German flagged MSC Flaminia, experienced fire and explosion in one of its holds leading to the abandonment of the ship and the loss of two lives.

As a consequence of these accidents, ship owning associations and the IMO have work in hand to ensure the accurate declaration of the weight and contents of containers.

The risks of serious shipping accidents are higher because checks and balances to monitor effective compliance with required international standards are not effective. International treaties, regulations and codes of conduct are only part of the story. Responsibility for effective implementation and enforcement rests at the national level, and for this, countries need efficient maritime administrations.

Under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), flag States are responsible for ensuring ships flying their flag comply with generally accepted international standards, and are operated safely, including ensuring vessels are seaworthy and manned by appropriately qualified seafarers. But with the growth of “flags of convenience” or open registries, many flag states have proven incapable of discharging this responsibility effectively.

The system of Port State Control (PSC) was developed by the IMO to provide another check in the system. This allows port inspectors to visit an incoming foreign vessel to check compliance with the required standards. If serious deficiencies are found, a ship may be detained in port until these are rectified.

Unfortunately, PSC is not working in many parts of the world, and sub-standard ships with serious deficiencies continue to sail the world. These deficiencies might include defects in safety arrangements or crew without the required qualifications or experience.

Looking Ahead

The Titanic disaster led shipping into a new era of maritime safety. Looking ahead, technological developments, new risks, and changed public expectations, particularly with regard to marine pollution and security, highlight the need for ongoing efforts to ensure ship safety and security.

Two main trends are evident: ships are getting larger, but standards of ship safety and crew training and experience may be falling. Bulk carriers, container ships and cruise liners are all becoming larger. Bulk carriers are being built capable of carrying 400,000 tonnes of iron ore and coal, as well as container ships capable of carrying 17,000 containers. The grounding or sinking of such a large vessel could cause massive damage to the marine environment.

The problems with ensuring ship safety are currently more acute because shipping markets remain in the doldrums with depressed freight and charter rates for most classes of vessel, surplus shipping capacity, ships laid up, and more unemployed seafarers. This situation leads to the possibility that as ship owners cut costs, ships may become less well maintained and operated.

Much has been achieved over the years with ensuring ship safety and security, but major challenges still exist. There are no grounds for complacency. While the IMO does its best, the key responsibility rests with nation states. Unfortunately, many flag and port states lack the capacity to fulfil their responsibilities effectively.

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