

IMCO: Making the Seas Safer and Cleaner

Since 1959, when the IMCO Assembly met for the first time, the Organization has had two main objectives: the introduction of measures designed to improve safety at sea and to prevent pollution of the sea from ships.

It is appropriate, therefore, that the theme of this year's World Maritime Day, which fell on March 17, should be Safer Shipping and Cleaner Oceans.

The two themes are closely connected. An oil tanker (and the majority of the world's shipping, in tonnage terms, now consists of tankers) which is safe does not pollute the seas. Many measures which are designed to make shipping as a whole safer therefore have a beneficial effect upon the marine environment since they also apply to tankers. These measures include Conventions which relate to such matters as navigation, construction of ships and the equipment carried on board ships.

But during its twenty-year history IMCO has also adopted a number of Conventions and other measures which are aimed specifically at tankers and the problem of pollution.

The 1954 Oil Pollution Convention (for which IMCO became depositary in 1959) was the first major attempt by the maritime nations to curb the impact of oil pollution, but since then the problem has become even more serious today. The amount of oil carried by sea has risen by 700 per cent in 20 years – to around 1,700 million tons. The world tanker fleet has increased from 37 million deadweight tons in 1954 to around 340 million deadweight tons today, and the size of the tankers themselves has also grown amazingly.

The 1954 Convention was amended in 1962, but it was the wreck of the *Torrey Canyon* in 1967 which fully alerted the world to the great dangers which the transport of oil posed to the marine environment.

Following this disaster, IMCO produced a whole series of Conventions and other instruments. The 1954 Convention was again amended, in 1969, in order to reduce the amount of oil which can be discharged into the sea as a result of tank cleaning operations.

In the same year two new Conventions were adopted. One of these gives States the right to intervene in incidents on the high seas which are likely to result in oil pollution.

The second Convention deals with liability of the ship or cargo owner for damage suffered as a result of an oil pollution casualty. The Convention is intended to ensure that adequate compensation is available to victims and places the liability for the damage on the ship-owner.

The Inter-governmental Marine Consultative Organization (IMCO) was established 20 years ago; IMCO's headquarters are in London.

It was felt by some delegates to the Conference that the liability limits established at this Conference were too low, and that the compensation made available could in some cases, therefore, prove to be inadequate.

As a result, another Conference was convened by IMCO in 1971 which resulted in the adoption of a Convention establishing the International Fund for Compensation for Oil Pollution Damage. The Convention came into force in 1978 and the Fund has now been established with its headquarters in London.

These three Conventions all deal with what one might call the legal aspects of oil pollution. But the continuing boom in the transportation of oil showed that more work needed to be done on the technical side as well: the scale of oil pollution was so great in some areas that there was serious concern for the marine environment, not only as a result of accidents but through normal tanker operations, notably the cleaning of cargo tanks.

In 1973 a major conference was called to discuss the whole problem of marine pollution from ships and resulted in the adoption of the most ambitious anti-pollution Convention ever adopted. The Marine Pollution Convention dealt not only with oil but other forms of pollution, including that from garbage, sewage, chemicals and other harmful substances.

The Convention greatly reduces the amount of oil which can be discharged into the sea by ships, and bans such discharges completely in certain areas (such as the Black Sea, Red Sea and other regions).

In practice certain technical problems meant that progress towards ratifying this Convention was very slow, and a series of tanker accidents which occurred in the winter of 1976–77 led to demands for further action. The result was the convening of the Conference on Tanker Safety and Pollution Prevention in February 1978.

This Conference could well prove to be one of the most important ever held by IMCO. Not only did it complete its work in a remarkably short time (barely ten months after the first call to IMCO to convene the Conference was made) but the measures adopted will have a profound effect on tankers in the future.

They include requirements for such operational techniques as crude oil washing (a development of the earlier 'load on top' system) and inert gas systems, but also include constructional requirements such as segregated ballast tanks for much smaller ships than stipulated in the 1973 Convention. The most important of the new measures are incorporated in Protocols to the 1974 Convention on the Safety of Life at Sea and the 1973 Marine Pollution Convention. It is expected that one effect will be to bring the requirements of the 1973 Convention regarding oil pollution into force much more rapidly than would have been possible before.

In addition to these measures, IMCO has also been working on various other projects which are designed to reduce the threat of oil pollution. One of these is the Regional Oil-Combating Centre established in Malta in conjunction with the United Nations Environment Programme in December 1976.

While the promotion of international agreements is and will remain an important part of the Organization's work, IMCO is devoting increasing attention to the problem of effective implementation of these agreements on an international scale. The Organization now consists of 111 Member States — four times as many as when the IMCO Assembly met for

the first time in January 1959. Many of these Members are developing nations, some of which lack the experience and resources of the more traditionally maritime nations.

To assist these States in reaching the high standards laid down in Conventions and other instruments, IMCO has evolved an extensive technical assistance programme which operates both from IMCO Headquarters and from specified centres in the various regions of the developing world.

The success achieved to date through the goodwill and determined efforts of the international community, using IMCO as a forum and a platform, merely demonstrates that the past 20 years in the struggle for safer shipping and cleaner oceans are indeed only the first 20 years of a continuing endeavour.