

Interface group in the dock

Is there a future for the IMO working group on the ship/port interface? The body had looked doomed to extinction until the maritime security issue surfaced

The International Maritime Organization's Ship/Port Interface (SPI) Working Group has been stumbling along in recent years, making a relatively minor contribution to the central IMO role of revising and updating the regulatory regime governing maritime safety and environmental protection.

The agency's primary focus on maritime matters and doubts over the extent to which the jurisdiction of the IMO regime should be extended from inland from the jetty inland to encompass port activities have served to hinder the work of the SPI Working Group.

Many IMO member governments believe that port area activities fall outside the remit of a traditional maritime administration. The fact that ports are either privately operated or regulated by different national statutory provisions and government agencies has only added to the confusion surrounding the work of SPI. This, in turn, has discouraged many delegations from participating in the work of the Group. As a result, the work programme for recent SPI Working Group meetings has featured only three agenda items: the availability of tug assistance; the development of a manual covering the handling of dry bulk cargoes; and the preparation of a manual covering the training of port personnel.

Furthermore, the port personnel training item has been downgraded, following a decision to limit the guidelines to those areas where the need for the training of port marine personnel had been identified. To date, only the need to provide minimum training and education for mooring services personnel has been so identified. However, two new developments have now given the SPI Working Group a new lease of life. First, the ongoing work on maritime security has injected a new dimension to the importance of the SPI Group. This needs to be considered before any final decision is made on the future of the Working Group.

At a special diplomatic conference in London in December 2002 IMO adopted several amendments to the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) Convention aimed at strengthening maritime security and preventing and suppressing acts of terrorism against shipping.

One of the SOLAS amendments enshrines the new International Ship and Port Facility Security Code (ISPS Code). The Code contains security-related requirements for governments, port authorities and shipping companies in a mandatory section (Part A) and guidelines in a non-mandatory section (Part B). This new security regime is set to enter into force in July 2004.

In addition, IMO is conducting its own internal review of its strategy and policies, with a view to recommending improvements in the IMO organisation and method of work to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the sub-committees. It has been agreed that there is no point in carrying out any restructuring work until the results of the internal review are available.

The terms of reference of the SPI Working Group will be reviewed at the 77th Session of the IMO Maritime Safety Committee (MSC) which is scheduled for May 28-June 6, 2003.