

US meeting airs differences

Two day's of top level discussion at Intertanko's annual meeting in April identified a host of challenges the international tanker industry faces. From Brussels to Washington, from class to safety, speakers had plenty to say and delegates much to ask.

War in Iraq, volatile freight rates and strikes in Venezuela have given the tanker industry a bumper ride over the past year. Combine capricious market moves with a slew of new legislation from Brussels, the US and International Maritime Organisation and the coming year looks just as unpredictable.

These and other subjects faced the delegates at the annual Intertanko conference held this year in Washington, DC, the source of much of the unilateral legislation that is being piled onto the tanker operating sector.

While little was said on the issue of ports of refuge, the loss of the tanker Prestige has created a great deal of uncertainty. Commenting on ports of refuge, Peter Swift, Intertanko chairman said: "Everyone knows what must be done. There has been enough talk. It's time for action - we must have designated ports of refuge."

Chris Horrocks, chairman of the International Chamber of Shipping, said: "The Prestige has changed the politics of the game far more than any other incident since the Exxon Valdez, and we are going to feel the consequences of this for a very long time."

Mr Horrocks expressed concern for the United Nations Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) treaty, which had been threatened by France and Spain's escort of single hull vessels outside their territorial waters and economic zones. This is a "blatant abrogation of their responsibilities under UNCLOS," said Mr Horrocks.

Admiral Paul Pluta, assistant commandant of the US Coast Guard for marine and environmental protection, stressed that although Maritime Security in the US had a high priority this did not detract from the safety and environmental protection goals of the US Coast Guard. Admiral Pluta highlighted the successes of OPA as well as the US legislative interest regarding the recent Prestige incident. He concluded his remarks focusing on the time and effort being put in by the security personnel and his staff working day and night to meet the July 2004 Interim Final Rule and November Final Rule deadlines imposed by the US Maritime Security Act of 2002.

Bob Sommerville, president of US classification society ABS - classifier of the Prestige, reiterated his call for greater transparency and said that the industry "is in the firing line and needs a co-operative, industry-wide strategy. Incremental change is not enough."

Concerned about the resurgence of class hopping, Mr Sommerville said a "failure to disclose information will damage the industry (reputation)...the changed circumstances now demand a step-change response from the industry."

Elsewhere, the so-called LAN group of classification societies came under pressure at the event with several speakers and delegates questioning the methodology of the group.

Comprising senior officials of Lloyd's Register, American Bureau of Shipping and Det Norske Veritas, the group is proposing a complete overhaul of the safety regulations. The societies have provoked anger from fellow members of the International Association of Classification Societies whom feel excluded from what they perceive as a secret group that could lose the support of fellow members.

Stephen Van Dyck, head of Intertanko's North American Panel and chairman of Maritrans, voiced the fears of many when he asked what "is so difficult and secret about this that we cannot be at the table."

Although a handful of industry experts have been invited to participate, Dr Nikos Mikelis, chair of Intertanko's safety,

technical and environmental committee and director of Paralos Shipping, noted that outsiders had been sworn to secrecy and forbidden to speak to anyone about the proposals.

Bill Gray, an experienced maritime official and shipping consultant, has been consulted by the group and felt "confident that they will produce something broadly acceptable to the industry".

Speaking at the conference, Wilhelm Magelssen, vice president at DNV, urged patience among his fellow IACS members saying it was easier to develop new rules in a small group before presenting to the whole group of 10 societies.

Dr Mikelis, voiced concern that the new rules could be exploited by shipyards, while Hans Payer, a board member at Germany's Germanischer Lloyd, said the new rules would only be a success if applied across the whole industry and challenge owners trying to make vessels as cheaply as possible.

IACS next meets in June, and LAN will be very much of the minds of delegates.

The thorny subject of ship vetting

was also raised, notably by Robert Curt, general manager of marine transportation at ExxonMobil. "Our goal is flawless operations...Our vetting affiliates are not there solely to accept or reject vessels, They have a definite desire to work with ship-owners to ensure that owners are fully aware of the safety criteria required for vessels considered for ExxonMobil service."

Responding to a question about the increased pressure in ship vetting procedures from a conference delegate, Mr Curt said that lawyers in his company had begun to warn about the dangers of being sued. "Our vetting affiliates are not there solely to accept or reject vessels. They have a definite desire to work with shipowners to ensure that owners are fully aware of the safety criteria for vessels considered for ExxonMobil."

Speaking at a post-event press conference, Lars Carlsson, Intertanko chairman, said that although the industry is being affected by new legislation from a range of governments and supranational bodies, the industry is still in charge of its own destiny. "It is no longer possible to run sub-standard ships - unless you are cheating the system. But when 40m dwt of tankers are phased out after one accident (Prestige), which is not (wholly) the fault of an owner, classification society (for example, the pressure is on the rest of us) to continue to do a good job.

"(The tanker industry) must focus on (minimising) human error and offering better training to crew members." We must keep encouraging people to join our industry."