Conference on Safety of Large Passenger Ships

Speech by Mr. W.A. O'Neil, Secretary-General of IMO
Institute of Marine Engineers, 15 May 2000

Director General, Chief Executive Maurice Storey, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a pleasure to be with you today, and I would like to thank you very much for inviting me to join you. The Institute of Marine Engineers has been involved with IMO for a few years now and in that time has proved itself to be a very valuable member of the IMO community. The fact that you have taken the initiative in calling, together with the United Kingdom Maritime and Coastguard Agency, this Conference on Safety of Large Passenger Ships indicates how strongly you share our own concern about safety at sea.

I think that there is no doubt at all that the increase in popularity of vacationers taking cruises today has provided a tremendous boost to this segment of the shipping industry. On the one hand, this is greatly welcomed. It has given a lift to shipbuilding and ports and has provided shipowners, who have been struggling for years against rising costs and sluggish freight rates with an opportunity to develop lucrative new markets.

But coupled with the desire to capitalize on this development, we have to recognize that it brings with it certain obligations that need to be considered - and to prompt our thinking about these I would mention a few names: Norwegian Dream, Sun Vista, Ecstasy, Prinsesse Ragnhild, Dashun, Monarch of the Seas, Romantica, Hanseatic, Royal Viking Sun, Albatross, Sagafjord, and Achille Lauro. They are all the names of passenger ships which were involved in accidents at sea during the last six years. In some cases the ship concerned sank and in retrospect we can see that it was to some extent a matter of luck - good weather, calm seas and other ships in the vicinity, for example - that very few lives were lost. However, if we look at another list of names - Dona Paz, Fierté Gonavienne, Estonia, Scandinavian Star and Herald of Free Enterprise with tremendous loss of lives we can see what might have happened. And we cannot rely on luck holding indefinitely.

It is for this reason that I have requested IMO's senior technical body, the Maritime Safety Committee, to add a review of the safety of large passenger ships to its work programme for its meeting which begins this Wednesday. I would like to emphasize that I have no reason to doubt that the cruise ships that have been built recently all comply meticulously with IMO requirements. I would also like to stress that a great deal of work to enhance passenger ship safety has already been undertaken or initiated by IMO, which includes a consideration of evacuation procedures in the event of emergencies.

Nevertheless, I think that the time has come for IMO to make an extensive examination of all safety issues pertaining to large passenger ships. It is not, as I have just said, that the ships being built today do not comply with IMO requirements, because they do. But we have to make sure that the standards and operating procedures themselves have kept pace with the changes in design and operations that have characterised the cruise ship revolution.

The Load Line Convention, for example, was adopted in 1966. It is essentially still the same text today, mainly because the original amendment procedure made it virtually impossible to modernize and update the convention within a reasonable time. Fortunately a protocol adopted in 1988 entered into force in February this year and will at last enable changes to be made quickly. But I think we are obliged to ask ourselves whether regulations adopted more than thirty years ago are still as valid and applicable today as they were at that time of their development.

The current SOLAS Convention was adopted in 1974 and has been updated regularly since then. The Chapter dealing with life-saving, for example, was completely re-written in 1983 and again in 1996. But the Convention, like the Load Lines Convention, was drafted with the ships of the 1970s in mind. Few passenger ships were around 50,000 gross tons at that time. Now 100,000 gt seems to be more of a standard for cruise ships and we read of plans to build giants of 450,000 gt, able to carry 9,600 passengers. Did the experts who drafted SOLAS in the early 1970s - and all the amendments that have been adopted since then - ever consider the fact that such huge vessels were likely to appear on the

scene? Another factor that needs to be taken into account is that many cruise ships operating today are very old - the Queen Elizabeth 2 is well over thirty years of age and some ships now operating are forty, fifty or even older. How have they stood up to the rigours of the years and how much out of step are they with advances in technology?

Some of the concerns that have been expressed recently have focused on the question of evacuation of the passengers and crew. SOLAS stipulates that all survival craft must be capable of being launched with their full complement of persons and equipment within thirty minutes of the abandon ship alarm being given. But being "capable of being launched" and actually removing the people are two different things.

It is essential that the survivability of the ships should be determined under various disaster scenarios and if the standards are found to be wanting in any respect, stability after collision, fire protection and so on, then they should be changed. Utilizing this information, evacuation procedures and times can then be considered in detail also taking into account the large number of people involved. It is important to keep in mind that the passengers have little or no knowledge of ships and the sea, they are on board for a pleasurable time where "fun" is the operable word. The weather could be severe and darkness could be an enemy – with people being unsure in a hostile and foreign environment.

We must assure that these and all other factors are revisited and examined in detail so that the risks are reduced to the minimum and, to the degree possible, guarantees can be given that those on board can be evacuated without loss of life or injury no matter what.

But the issue does not stop there, the exposure to danger would not be over. Several thousand people - including children and the elderly - could be crowded into scores of lifeboats and liferafts, waiting to be rescued. How long would they have to wait for assistance? Not long in those parts of the world where there are numerous ships in the well-travelled sea lanes – the North Atlantic, Mediterranean and Caribbean perhaps, but what about the Antarctic, which is becoming a more popular destination for cruise liners? Regulations regarding the evacuation of passenger ships and the lifeboats themselves are based on the assumption that rescue ships will arrive at the scene within a reasonable time - within hours. Can that be guaranteed in the vast expanse of the southern oceans, several days' sail from the regular shipping routes? SAR arrangements globally are being improved and we are thankful for this but the best SAR resources in the world would have great difficulty in coping with a situation in remote areas.

Another factor which must be considered relates to the crew and their availability, seamanship skills and language competence. While the training of the professional seafarers is well covered by the STCW a large number of the crew are on board to provide hotel services, maids and the like, and to work in the casinos, or are entertainers, musicians and dancers and are not professional sailors. They usually receive some training on how to handle emergency situations but many have little more experience of life at sea than the passengers themselves. Their reaction and response under the pressure of crisis could be uncertain. If we look at the number of crew available to cope, the QE2 was designed for 1,000 crew and 1,760 passengers - a ratio of 1 to 1.7. The trend since then has been to increase the number of passengers, without a corresponding increase in the size of the crew. For example, one giant cruise ship launched last year can carry 3,880 passengers and has a crew of 1,140 - a ratio of 1 to 3.5.

So far I have paid considerable attention to evacuation and SAR procedures but only because they were the issues which prompted me to introduce the idea of a review of cruise shipping safety. But, of course, they lead us straight to the issue of prevention. It is self evident that we should avoid the need to evacuate in the first place and should look to the design, operation and maintenance of the ships and the competence of the crews to provide the envelope within which a safe operation can be assured.

This process has to start with the owner at the conceptional stage and then be carried on through the chain of steps which are involved – with safety being given the paramount consideration. If, as is most likely, choices have to be made between say – costs, comfort, aesthetics or safety – then safety must be selected.

Your programme for the next two days has experts who will go into these and other topics in great detail and I am sure will shed light on how these matters are and will be addressed.

While not directly related to safety I believe that a few comments on pollution related to passenger ships would be in order. A ship with 5,000 people on board is in effect a floating town and it produces the same amount of wastes daily. How are they to be disposed of? IMO's MARPOL Convention lays down strict rules about this, one of its basic principles being that reception facilities should be provided on shore for receiving wastes. But is it reasonable to expect a tiny port on a Caribbean island, for example, to dispose of the wastes generated by the large number of cruise ships that call there at the peak of the season? This is becoming a major problem, not only for the island States but for the cruise ship operators as well.

No one wants to see the pristine waters of the tourist areas polluted with oil, plastics and other rubbish – after all, the reason for seeking out these beauty spots is to be able to enjoy their sandy beaches and clear waters. There is therefore an obligation on the cruise industry to see their operations do not adversely affect this and to assist the coastal States to provide reception facilities and disposal arrangements which will guarantee that the environment does not suffer.

Mr. Chairman, these are just some of the reasons why I feel that the time has come for IMO to undertake a global consideration of the safety issues pertaining to passenger ships, especially large cruise ships. IMO and the shipping industry as a whole cannot afford to sit back and hope that nothing goes wrong and then be forced into action when it does. A great deal has, of course, been done.

SOLAS has been updated steadily over the years, as have other key conventions and this process is continuing. IMO is currently dealing with such issues as evacuation times, life-saving appliances and arrangements, smoke detectors and smoke control systems, the harmonization of subdivision and damage stability requirements, search and rescue plans for cruise ships on fixed routes, automatic identification systems and voyage data recorders, crisis management and human behaviour.

But the work that has been done over the years has been rather piecemeal. We have not examined all the issues involved in a co-ordinated and integrated fashion. That is why I have suggested that the Maritime Safety Committee should now undertake its review. Do the SOLAS and Load Line Conventions meet the requirements of today - and will they continue to be relevant to the needs of tomorrow? Is the STCW Convention in tune with the needs of large passenger vessels? Are the operational procedures correct?

I would like to emphasise once again, Mr. Chairman, that I am not criticising the cruise ship industry nor casting a cloud over its operations and the emphasis it places on safety. I am sure that the vast majority of cruise ships operating today meet all international standards. But the industry is growing and evolving so rapidly that we cannot afford to be complacent. We must make sure that the standards and procedures themselves are appropriate and continue to be so.

We are dealing with one of the highest profile components of the shipping industry – the carriage of people – where all precautions must be taken to assure their safety. I have suggested that the MSC may wish to establish a working group to consider all the issues involved. Members of the public who created the current boom in the industry must be assured that their safety is paramount because this really is the key to the ongoing success of cruise shipping. The passengers see cruising as a way of relaxing in luxury, while travelling at leisure from one beauty spot to another. They do not think about safety and the possibility of something going wrong. But we do and we should take action now to make sure that it never does.

Mr. Chairman, I congratulate the Institute of Marine Engineers and the United Kingdom Maritime and Coastguard Agency for organizing this Conference and thank the sponsors for their involvement.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Conference programme covers many issues and you are fortunate to have so many experts available to speak to you. I am sure that this meeting will be productive and helpful to IMO as it considers the safety of large passenger ships and I wish you every success.

Thank you.