

4 ALBERT EMBANKMENT
LONDON SE1 7SR
Telephone: +44 (0)20 7735 7611

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PROCEDURE FOR RESPONDING TO DSC DISTRESS ALERTS BY SHIPS

1 The Maritime Safety Committee, at its 111th session (13 to 22 May 2026), approved the revised *Procedure for responding to DSC distress alerts by ships*, as set out in the annex, prepared by the Sub-Committee on Navigation, Communications and Search and Rescue (NCSR), at its twelfth session (13 to 22 May 2025).

2 This circular provides a procedure to be followed by radio personnel on board ships when responding to DSC distress alerts on the appropriate VHF, MF and HF channels, in accordance with chapter IV of the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, 1974. Flow diagrams 1 and 2 in the annex are recommended to be displayed on ships' bridges as A4 size posters.

3 Member States are invited to bring the annexed Procedure to the attention of seafarers and all other parties concerned.

4 This circular supersedes MSC.1/Circ.1657.

ANNEX

PROCEDURE FOR RESPONDING TO DSC DISTRESS ALERTS BY SHIPS

1 Introduction

This document provides a procedure for responding to digital selective calling (DSC) distress alerts on the appropriate VHF, MF and HF channels, given in flow diagrams 1 and 2, which are recommended to be displayed on the ship's bridge as A4 size posters. It also provides the following guidance.

2 Distress alert relays

2.1 Radio personnel serving on ships should be made aware of the consequences of transmitting a distress alert relay and of routeing a distress alert relay to destinations other than coast stations (CSs).

2.2 The number of unintended activations of DSC distress alerts and DSC distress alert relays creates extra workload and confusion for (maritime) rescue coordination centres ((M)RCCs) and also causes delay in the response-time. The original distress alert from a ship in distress should not be disrupted by other ships, by transmitting a DSC distress alert relay.

2.3 Recommendation ITU-R M.541 on *Operational procedures for the use of digital selective-calling equipment in the maritime mobile service* identifies only two situations in which a ship would transmit a distress call relay (distress alert relay):

- .1 on receiving an HF DSC distress alert, which is not acknowledged by a coast station within five minutes, the ship should inform a coast station or a rescue coordination centre and, if instructed by the coast station or the rescue coordination centre, transmit the distress alert relay (annex 1, paragraph A1-3.4.2 and annex 3, paragraph A3-6.1.4); and
- .2 on learning that another ship in distress is not itself able to transmit the distress alert, and if the master of the ship considers that further help is necessary. The distress alert relay should preferably be addressed to an individual coast station or rescue coordination centre (annex 3, paragraph A3-1.4.2).

2.4 In no case is a ship permitted to transmit an all ships DSC distress alert relay on receipt of a DSC distress alert on either VHF or MF channels.

2.5 A distress alert relay on HF channels should be initiated manually.

2.6 Compliance with the operational and technical provisions above would prevent the transmission of inappropriate distress alert relays.

3 All-coast stations call

3.1 Recommendation ITU-R M.493 on *Digital selective-calling system for use in the maritime mobile service* provides for calling a group of stations having a common interest (i.e. "group calls"). In this context, Recommendation ITU-R M.585 on *Assignment and use of identities in the maritime mobile service* defines the following group call coast station identities:

- .1 0₁0₂M₃l₄D₅X₆X₇X₈X₉: group coast station identity assigned by an administration;
- .2 0₁0₂M₃l₄D₅0₆0₇0₈0₉: reserved for *all* 0₁0₂M₃l₄D₅X₆X₇X₈X₉ identities assigned by an administration;
- .3 0₁0₂9₃9₄9₅0₆0₇0₈0₉: reserved for the all-coast stations identity and addresses all VHF 00XXXXXXX stations (it is not applicable to MF or HF coast stations).

3.2 A number of administrations have already assigned a "group call" MMSI to their coast stations in addition to the coast station's individual MMSI. For the purpose of the GMDSS, the details of these MMSI assignments should be made available on a 24-hours-per-day, 365-days-per-year basis to authorized entities such as, but not limited to, RCCs.

3.3 By multilateral agreements, a "group call" MMSI could be assigned to all coast stations within a specific region, e.g. an RCC area, and could comply with IMO's requirement without need of introducing further modifications to GMDSS equipment.

4 Authorization

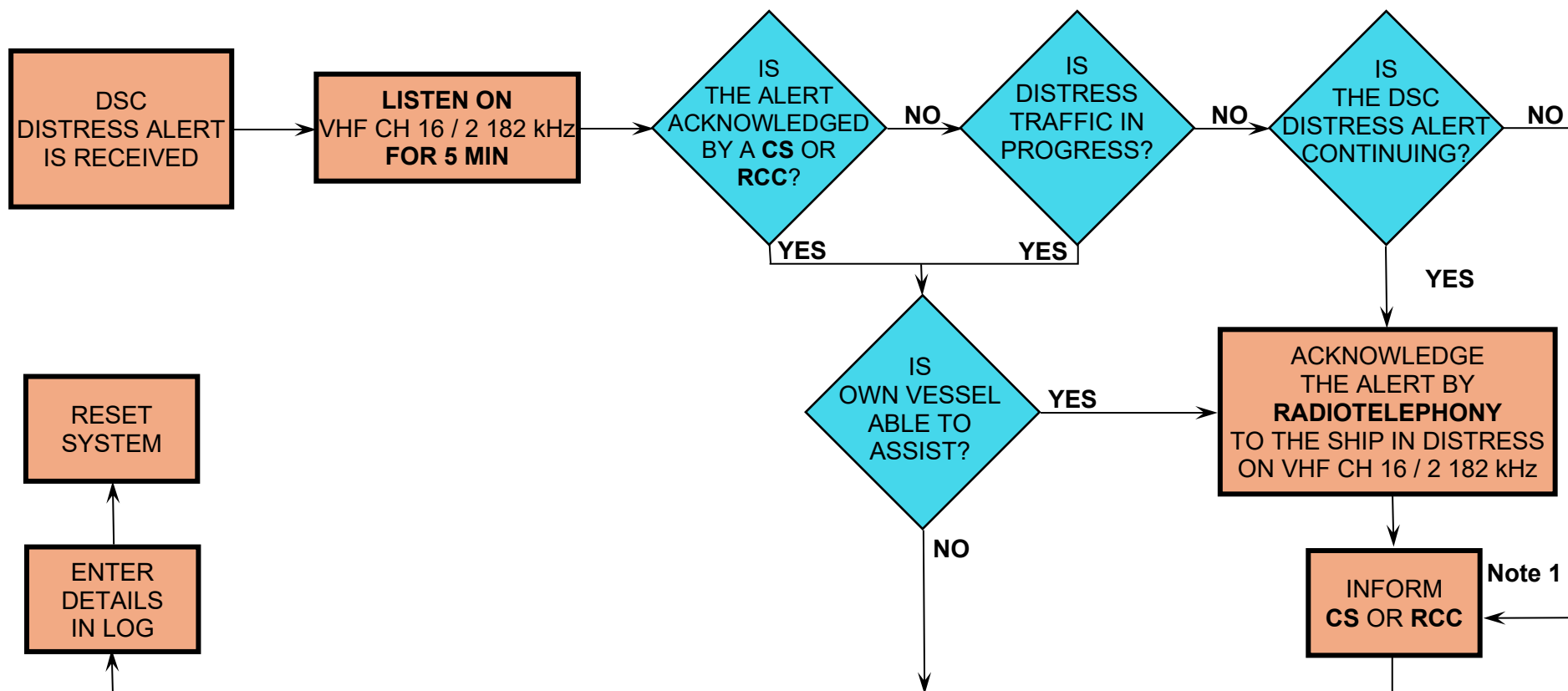
It should be noted that on ships, distress alerts, distress alert acknowledgements and distress alert relays can only be transmitted with the permission of the master of the ship.

5 Flow diagrams

5.1 The enclosed flow diagrams 1 and 2 describe actions to be taken aboard ships upon receipt of DSC distress alerts from other ships.

FLOW DIAGRAM 1

ACTIONS BY SHIPS UPON RECEPTION OF A VHF / MF DSC DISTRESS ALERT



REMARKS:

Note 1: An appropriate coast station or RCC should be informed accordingly. If further DSC distress alerts are received from the same station and the ship in distress is beyond doubt in the vicinity, a DSC acknowledgement may be transmitted to terminate the call, only if directed to do so by a coast station or RCC.

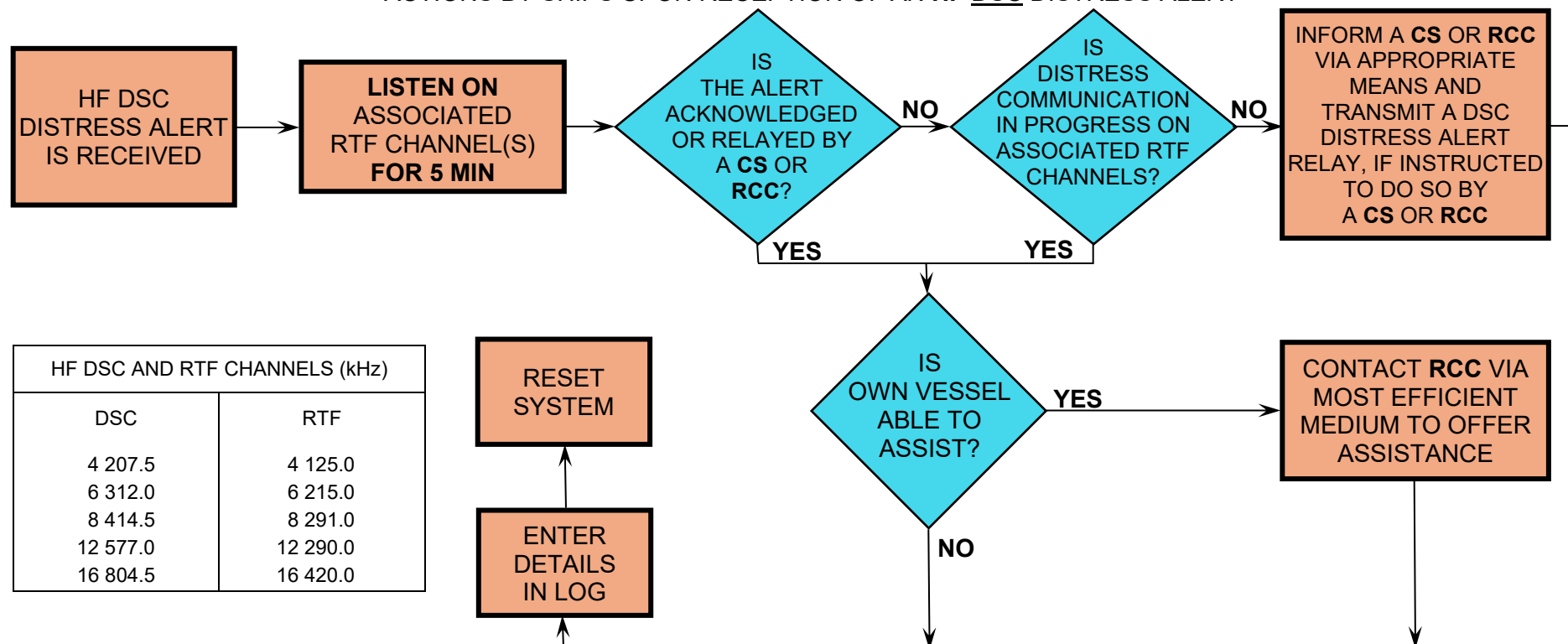
Note 2: In no case is a ship permitted to transmit an all ships DSC distress alert relay on receipt of a DSC distress alert on either VHF channel 70 or MF channel 2 187.5 kHz.

CS = coast station

RCC = rescue coordination centre

FLOW DIAGRAM 2

ACTIONS BY SHIPS UPON RECEPTION OF AN HF DSC DISTRESS ALERT



REMARKS:

NOTE 1: If it is clear that the ship or persons in distress are not in the vicinity and/or other craft are better placed to assist, superfluous communications, which could interfere with search and rescue activities, are to be avoided. Details should be recorded in the appropriate logbook.

NOTE 2: The ship should establish communications with the station controlling the distress as directed and render such assistance as required and appropriate.

NOTE 3: Distress alert relays should be initiated manually.

CS = coast station

RCC = rescue coordination centre