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**MINIMIZING DELAYS IN SEARCH AND RESCUE RESPONSE
TO DISTRESS ALERTS**

1 The Maritime Safety Committee (MSC), at its eighty-third session (3 to 12 October 2007), recognizing the importance of minimizing delays in SAR response to distress alerts by encouraging Member States to fulfil their obligations under the SAR Convention and other international instruments, approved the guidance prepared by the Sub-Committee on Radiocommunications and Search and Rescue (COMSAR), at its eleventh session, as set out in the annex.

2 Member Governments are invited to bring the annexed guidance to the attention of SAR authorities and all other parties concerned.

ANNEX

STATE OBLIGATIONS UNDER THE SAR CONVENTION AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL INSTRUMENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The purpose of this circular is to minimize delays in SAR response to distress alerts, and in particular, distress alerts received by the COSPAS-SARSAT system. It reminds States of their obligations under the SAR Convention and other relevant international instruments. Selected extracts from these documents are listed indicatively as means of better understanding State obligations and how such obligations can be met individually or in co-operation with other States. Whereas the conventions and similar instruments provide the standards and recommendations, the International Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue (IAMSAR) Manual contains detailed guidance on how to attain them.

1.2 Definitions of particular relevance and as defined in the IAMSAR Manual:

- Rescue co-ordination centre (RCC): A unit responsible for promoting efficient organization of SAR services and for co-ordinating the conduct of SAR operations within a SAR region.
- Search and rescue region (SRR): An area of defined dimensions, associated with a rescue co-ordination centre, within which SAR services are provided.
- Search and rescue service: The performance of distress monitoring, communication, co-ordination and search and rescue functions, including provision of medical advice, initial medical assistance, or medical evacuation, through the use of public and private resources, including co-operating aircraft, vessels and other craft and installations.
- Search and rescue point of contact (SPOC): RCCs and other established and recognized national points of contact which can accept responsibility to receive COSPAS-SARSAT alert data to enable the rescue of persons in distress.

1.3 Whether or not a State is signatory to a convention with SAR provisions, the State nonetheless takes on certain responsibilities when it declares an SRR. A key purpose of declaring an SRR is to ensure that distress alerts are routed to the correct RCC in a timely manner so that proper operational co-ordination is conducted. This does not necessarily mean that an RCC or SPOC has to conduct all of the response effort; however, it does mean it will co-ordinate the response effort. This co-ordination role could include serving as a point of contact to advise that the RCC needs further support or, at times, that another unit may be better able to serve that purpose. Mutual co-operation and co-ordination among States and between maritime and aeronautical SAR authorities can further support the provision of adequate and prompt SAR services.

2 INTERNATIONAL INSTRUMENTS

2.1 International Convention for the Safety of life at Sea (SOLAS), Consolidated Edition, 2004

CHAPTER IV Radiocommunications Part B

Undertakings by Contracting Governments

Regulation 5

Provision of radiocommunication services

1 Each Contracting Government undertakes to make available, as deems practical and necessary either individually or in co-operation with other Contracting Governments, appropriate shore-based facilities for space and terrestrial radiocommunications services having due regard to the recommendations of the Organization.

CHAPTER V Safety of navigation

Regulation 7

Search and rescue services

1 Each Contracting Government undertakes to ensure that necessary arrangements are made for distress communication and co-ordination in their area of responsibility and for the rescue of persons in distress at sea around its coasts. These arrangements shall include the establishment, operation and maintenance of such search and rescue facilities as are deemed practicable and necessary, having regard to the density of the seagoing traffic and the navigational dangers and shall, so far as possible, provide adequate means of locating and rescuing such persons.

2.2 International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR), 1979

Annex

Chapter 2

Organization and co-ordination

2.1.3 To help ensure the provision of adequate shore-based communication infrastructure, efficient distress alerting, and proper operational co-ordination to effectively support search and rescue services, Parties shall, individually or in co-operation with other States, ensure that sufficient search and rescue regions are established ...

2.1.9 Parties having accepted the responsibility to provide search and rescue services for a specified area shall use search and rescue units and other available facilities for providing assistance to a person who is, or appears to be, in distress at sea.

2.3.2 Each rescue co-ordination centre and rescue sub-centre, established in accordance with paragraph 2.3.3, shall arrange for the receipt of distress alerts originating from within its search and rescue region. Every such centre shall also arrange for communications with persons in distress, with search and rescue facilities, and with other rescue co-ordination centres or rescue sub-centres.

Chapter 3:

Co-operation between States

3.3.1 Parties shall co-ordinate their search and rescue organizations and should, whenever necessary, co-ordinate search and rescue operations with those of neighbouring States.

Chapter 4:

Operating procedures

4.2.1 Parties, either individually or in co-operation with other States, shall ensure that they are capable on a 24-hour basis of promptly and reliably receiving distress alerts from equipment used for this purpose within their search and rescue regions. Any alerting post receiving a distress alert shall:

- .1 immediately relay the alert to the appropriate rescue co-ordination centre or sub-centre, and then assist with search and rescue communications as appropriate; and
- .2 if practicable, acknowledge the alert.

2.3 Convention on International Civil Aviation, Annex 12 – Search and Rescue

Chapter 2: Organization

2.1 Search and Rescue Services

2.1.1 Contracting States shall, individually or in co-operation with other States, arrange for the establishment and prompt provision of search and rescue services within their territories to ensure that assistance is rendered to persons in distress. Such services shall be provided on a 24-hour basis.

2.1.1.1 Those portions of the high seas or areas of undetermined sovereignty for which search and rescue services will be established shall be determined on the basis of regional air navigation agreements. Contracting States having accepted the responsibility to provide search and rescue services in such areas shall thereafter, individually or in co-operation with other States, arrange for the services to be established and provided in accordance with the provisions of this annex.

2.2 Search and Rescue Regions

2.2.1 (...) Note 1. – Search and rescue regions are established to ensure the provision of adequate communication infrastructure, efficient distress alert routing and proper operational co-ordination to effectively support search and rescue services. Neighbouring States may co-operate to establish search and rescue services within a single SAR region.

2.4.1 Each rescue co-ordination centre shall have means of rapid and reliable two-way communication with:

- f) all maritime rescue co-ordination centres in the region and aeronautical, maritime or joint rescue co-ordination centres in adjacent regions;
- i) alerting posts;
- j) the COSPAS-SARSAT Mission Control Centre servicing the search and rescue region.

Chapter 3: Co-operation

3.2.5 States shall designate a search and rescue point of contact for the receipt of COSPAS-SARSAT distress data.

Chapter 5: Operating procedures

5.2.4 In the event that an emergency phase is declared in respect of an aircraft whose position is unknown and may be in one of two or more search and rescue regions, the following shall apply:

- a) When a rescue co-ordination centre is notified of the existence of an emergency phase and is unaware of other centres taking appropriate action, it shall assume responsibility for initiating suitable action in accordance with 5.2 and confer with neighbouring rescue co-ordination centres with the objective of designating one rescue co-ordination centre to assume responsibility forthwith.
- b) Unless otherwise decided by common agreement of the rescue co-ordination centres concerned the rescue co-ordination centre to co-ordinate search and rescue action shall be the centre responsible for:
 - the region in which the aircraft last reported its position; or
 - the region in which the distress site is located as identified by the COSPAS-SARSAT system.

2.4 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), 1982, Article 98

2 Every coastal State shall promote the establishment, operation and maintenance of an adequate and effective search and rescue service regarding safety on and over the water and, where circumstances so require, by way of mutual regional arrangements, co-operate with neighbouring States for this purpose.

2.5 Convention on the High Seas, 1958, Article 12

2 Every coastal State shall promote the establishment and maintenance of an adequate and effective search and rescue service regarding safety on and over the sea and – where circumstances so require – by way of mutual regional arrangements co-operate with neighbouring States for this purpose.

2.6 COSPAS-SARSAT Programme Management Policy, document C/S P.011

5.2.1 SAR Points of Contact (SPOCs)

SPOCs are Mission Co-ordination Centres (MCCs), RCCs and other established and recognized national points of contact that can accept or assume responsibility for the co-ordination and the fast and effective transfer of COSPAS-SARSAT alert data to enable the rescue of persons in distress. To avail themselves of the System, States should:

- designate a single SAR point of contact (SPOC) for receiving COSPAS-SARSAT alert and location data for distress locations in their SAR area of responsibility;
- provide the address, telephone, telex or facsimile number or AFTN address of their SPOC to the COSPAS-SARSAT Secretariat; and
- develop a comprehensive plan for the distribution of alert and location data to SAR authorities, as appropriate.

3 Conclusion

3.1 In the interests of efficient SAR response, and hence the saving of lives at sea, States declaring responsibility for SAR Regions are urged to ensure that they comply with the spirit of the conventions and other international documents listed in paragraph 2 above – and particularly the COSPAS-SARSAT Programme Management Policy mentioned in paragraph 2.6 – and that they provide and maintain arrangements necessary for the reception and acknowledgement of, and the capability to respond to, distress alerts, including those derived from the COSPAS-SARSAT system.
