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AIS SAFETY-RELATED MESSAGING

1 The Sub-Committee on Radiocommunications and Search and Rescue (COMSAR), at its thirteenth session (19 to 23 January 2009), considered AIS safety-related broadcast messages and their ability to be used for distress purposes; and agreed to issue the present circular describing the limitations of using predefined distress text messages in distress situations.

2 Member Governments are invited to bring the annex to the attention of all parties concerned and, in particular, to mariners and, if practicable, AIS manufacturers and/or users, for information.

ANNEX

USE OF AIS SAFETY-RELATED MESSAGING IN DISTRESS SITUATIONS

1 AIS standards include safety-related text messaging functionality in Class A devices as a requirement and as an option in Class B devices. If safety-related messaging is provided in Class B devices, it shall be only through the use of pre-configured messages. Certain models of AIS have provided pre-configured safety-related messages which include distress alert information.

2 The Sub-Committee on Radiocommunications and Search and Rescue noted several limitations and concerns regarding the ability of these safety-related messages to mitigate distress situations, including, but not limited to, the following:

- .1 AIS text messaging is not part of the GMDSS. Its use for distress communications is not recognized internationally;
- .2 there is no related alerting or SAR infrastructure in place to accommodate transmissions of distress messages using AIS;
- .3 there are limited shore-based receivers. Although some Administrations have installed shore-based infrastructures for receiving AIS signals, those facilities do not necessarily include a means for receiving safety messages. Even where a means of receiving such messages exists, messages with preformatted distress information may not be recognized and handled as such;
- .4 the devices provide no facility for automatic repeats of an alert. AIS safety messages are transmitted only once, and if the signal is corrupted or interfered with in transmission, a situation not uncommon with AIS, the message may not be received;
- .5 there are no defined training requirements. Even if a distress message was successfully received, it might not be handled appropriately; and
- .6 no prioritization of messaging is available. In fact, the AIS standard requires that safety-related messages be given the lowest priority in their transmission.

3 Mariners should be aware of the limitations in using AIS safety-related messages, and that they may not be received, recognized or acted upon by authorities or other mariners.

4 Safety-related messages transmitted through the GMDSS system are immediately reacted upon by an MRCC, while safety-related messages transmitted through the AIS system might not be received in a system offering continuous listening watch of the frequencies. Therefore initial safety-related messages should be transmitted through the GMDSS system if rescue or assistance is immediately needed.

5 The Sub-Committee on Radiocommunications and Search and Rescue is of the view that AIS devices should be designed such that they cannot broadcast a pre-configured safety-related message (distress or otherwise), and it is recommended that AIS manufacturers and/or users should delete any pre-configured AIS safety-related messages that could be used to indicate distress.