

Cyprus ships win AMVER safety awards

Concerns remain over shipping regulations

More than 100 Cyprus-flag ships belonging to some 21 companies have won the coveted AMVER awards for maritime safety and assisting ships and persons in distress at sea.

U.S. Ambassador Michael Klosson presented the awards to the companies during the 'Day of the Sea' celebration near the Old Port of Limassol on Sunday.

A senior U.S. Coast Guard official, Capt. Michael Rand, was also at hand thanking the ships' owners for participating in the voluntary scheme that was introduced after the Titanic disaster.

AMVER, the Automated Mutual-Assistance Vessel Rescue system, is a computer based global ship reporting system used worldwide by search and rescue authorities to assist persons in distress at sea. With AMVER, rescue coordination can identify participating ships in the area of a distress and divert the best-suited ship or ships to respond.

Participation in the AMVER system is free, voluntary and open to merchant ships of all flags. The U.S. Coast Guard, in appreciation of the participation in the system, presents awards to ships accumulating 128 days on the AMVER plot in a calendar year.

Ships receive a certificate for each year of participation, while an inscribed pewter plate was awarded on Sunday to Kotani Shipmanagement Ltd. for 20 years' continuous participation in the AMVER system.

In his speech at the ceremony, Ambassador Klosson thanked the event's co-sponsors on AMVER — the Cyprus Shipping Council, Cyprus Marine and Environment Protection Association (CYMEPA), and the Propeller Club of the U.S. (International Port of Limassol) — for their cooperation and support.

2,500 lives saved

"AMVER is based on the unwritten bond among sailors that safety of life at sea is more important than cargo, flags or nationality. So we are here tonight to salute to unsung heroes. Tonight's heroes are the owners and executives, engineers and agents, and masters, officers and crews of the ships and companies.



From left: George Solomonides (Secretary, Propeller Club); Capt. Michael P. Rand (USCG); Serghios Serghiou (Director, Dept. of Merchant Shipping); Andreas Droushiotis (Chairman, Cyprus Shipping Council); Ambassador Michael Klosson; and, George Demetriou (Economic Affairs, US Embassy); at the 'Day of the Sea' event on Limassol's promenade.

"AMVER has its origins in the Titanic tragedy of 1912, when two ships passed by the passenger liner unaware that it was sinking. This loss highlighted the need for a system that could alert and coordinate responses to an emergency on the high seas. The advent of computer technology made the system a reality in 1958. Today, AMVER remains the only emergency response network on the world's oceans.

"Cyprus-flagged ships join those of more than 140 other countries, 12,000 ships worldwide, in forming a safety network that is stronger only because of the cooperation of all involved. This voluntary character of the system makes your participation all the more significant.

"Since 1990, AMVER ships have saved more than 2,500 lives. Last year alone, 143 were saved. AMVER ships respond to many types of disasters at sea. Some rescues occurred in fair skies and light winds, but many occurred in stormy seas and raging winds, and in the dark of night. These awards are a tribute to every mariner on an AMVER ship who puts himself or herself at risk to assist a fellow mariner.

"I commend the Cyprus government for issuing a circular to all owners, managers and representatives of ships under the Cyprus flag, to

encourage participation by every ship in this vital program. This proactive step by the Director of the Department of Merchant Shipping, Serghios Serghiou, will further enhance the safety of life at sea. Even if only a fraction of Cyprus' fleet of nearly 2,000 ships takes up this challenge and joins the ranks of those of you here tonight, it will be a tremendous gain indeed for the AMVER program and the safety of mariners and passengers world wide."

Cooperation with the US Coast Guard

On Monday, Capt. Rand addressed a workshop at CYMEPA House of 25 representatives and security officers of the leading shipping companies in Cyprus, with discussion focussing on the latest regulations in ship and port safety, as well as procedural problems.

At the same time, government officials expressed their shock that the USCG had placed Cyprus on the target list of non-compliance with the international ship and port safety (ISPS) code.

"Cyprus is fully committed to the code and all six port facilities on the island have the necessary compliance documentation in line with the relevant requirements," a senior official from the Department of Merchant Shipping said.

However, Capt. Rand, who is currently based in Rotterdam, explained that unless the retention rate of Cyprus ships (presently 8 of 200 inspected) improves, Cyprus will continue to be targeted. He also explained that since the ISPS code was fully introduced in July, the ratios were being reduced.

He also admitted that of the 3200 port facilities in the U.S., 22 were on the Coast Guard's watch list.

As regards the island's ports, Rand explained that if Cyprus reported to the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) that it complies with all the necessary requirements, then surely it will not be on the list of 17 targeted countries that have not reported to the IMO, from the 140 countries that trade with the U.S.

Discussion with ship safety compliance officers also raised the issue that the new European Union directives cover the whole area of a facility and not just the ports and the ships.

On the other hand, Capt. Rand praised Cyprus, saying it was among only a handful of countries, including the U.S., that are introducing various guidelines on ship and port safety.

Company representatives discussed in detail a number of problems and proposed recommendations on the issues of procedures regarding the boarding of U.S. Coast Guard

inspectors, better coordination with the U.S. immigration authority, a smoother procedure for the upgrade and issue of seafarers' visas. Other logistical problems included the not-so-smooth cooperation of certain U.S. embassies or consulates around the world and the most efficient way to transmit information to the U.S. authorities, which quite often is not the perceived web-based method.

"We recognise the problems that mariners are having," Capt. Rand told those attending the workshop, adding that as all services were now under the umbrella of the Homeland Security Department, closer cooperation and less red tape was anticipated.

"Today's meeting, which is something we don't do that often, was a success for both sides — both for me, representing the U.S. Coast Guard, and the company security officers that had real problems they wanted to deal with," Rand said.

He concluded that he would pass on several recommendations to the USCG as well as other services within the Homeland Security Dept., and would send responses to maritime officials in Cyprus for distribution. "We dealt with practical recommendations, unusual questions and concerns, but this is our policy — to share ideas and best practises," Rand said.



Company security officers at the workshop at CYMEPA House on Monday.