
Guidance on Large Scale Rescue Operations at Sea

Notice to ship owners, managers, Masters, Approved Nautical Inspectors, Recognised Organisations and surveyors

This Notice supersedes BMA Information Bulletin No.160

1. Purpose

- 1.1. This Information Notice provides guidance on large scale rescue operations at sea in cases where merchant ships rescue large numbers of persons from potentially unseaworthy vessels.

2. Application

- 2.1. This Notice applies to all Bahamian ships which may enter areas where maritime mixed migration occurs.

3. General

- 3.1. The International Maritime Organization (IMO) has called for greater focus to be placed on addressing unsafe migration by sea through more safe and regular migration pathways, so that fewer lives are lost due to large numbers of people setting out to cross the sea in overcrowded and unseaworthy vessels.
- 3.2. While this call is directed principally towards the international community it is merchant shipping which faces the challenge and responsibility of rescuing large number of people from unseaworthy boats at sea. The rescue of large numbers of persons raises health, safety and security issues which should be considered prior to undertaking voyages in areas where encounters with maritime migration can reasonably be anticipated.

4. Obligations and Guidance

- 4.1. In accordance with Regulation 33 of Chapter V of the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, 1974, as amended (SOLAS), the master of a ship is obliged to

provide assistance to persons in distress at sea irrespective of their nationality or the circumstances in which they are found.

- 4.2. The Bahamas Maritime Authority (BMA) is not aware of any instance of a master of a Bahamian ship failing to meet this obligation when it has arisen; to the contrary, several Bahamian ships have provided assistance to persons in distress, in some cases rescuing very large numbers of persons.
- 4.3. However, understandable concerns have been expressed to the BMA regarding matters of health (including protection from disease and sanitation), safety and security following rescue operations.
- 4.4. It is noted that merchant ships are generally ill-equipped to care for large numbers of rescued persons for extended periods of time. This raises challenges for operators of Bahamian ships who have primary health and safety duties to their employees under Bahamian law.
- 4.5. The challenges that the rescue of large numbers of persons at sea pose have been recognised both by the IMO and industry representative bodies and the BMA wishes to draw the attention of operators of Bahamian ships to two publications:
 - i. "[*Large-scale rescue operations at sea: Guidance on ensuring the safety and security of seafarers and rescued persons*](#)" (International Chamber of Shipping (ICS)); and
 - ii. "[*Rescue at Sea: A Guide to Principles and Practice as Applied to Refugees and Migrants*](#)" (UNHCR/IMO/ICS).
- 4.6. While these publications are not mandatory, the BMA considers that taking their contents into account will meet the requirements of ISM Code Section 8 "Emergency Preparedness".
- 4.7. The BMA should be advised when a Bahamian ship has, or intends to, conduct rescue operations so that appropriate assistance may be offered. The BMA may be contacted by email to tech@bahamasmaritime.com and casualty@bahamasmaritime.com or by telephone to any BMA office or the emergency response officer at +44 7977 471 220.

