

Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS)

The International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea Convention (SOLAS) is generally regarded as the most important of all international treaties concerning the safety of merchant ships.

The first version was adopted in 1914, in response to the Titanic disaster, the second in 1929, the third in 1948 and the fourth in 1960.

The 1960 Convention - which was adopted on 17 June 1960 and entered into force on 26 May 1965 - was the first major task for IMO after the Organisation's creation and it represented a considerable step forward in modernizing regulations and in keeping pace with technical developments in the shipping industry.

The intention was to keep the Convention up to date by periodic amendments but in practice the amendments procedure incorporated proved to be very slow. It became clear that it would be impossible to secure the entry into force of amendments within a reasonable period of time.

As a result, a completely new Convention was adopted in 1974 which included not only the amendments agreed up until that date but a new amendment procedure - the tacit acceptance procedure - designed to ensure that changes could be made within a specified (and acceptably short) period of time.

Instead of requiring that an amendment shall enter into force after being accepted by, for example, two thirds of the parties, the tacit acceptance procedure provides that an amendment shall enter into force on a specified date unless, before that date, objections to the amendment are received from an agreed number of parties.

As a result the 1974 Convention has been updated and amended on numerous occasions. The Convention in force today is sometimes referred to as SOLAS, 1974, as amended.

The main objective of the SOLAS Convention is to specify minimum standards for the construction, equipment and operation of ships, compatible with their safety. Flag States are responsible for ensuring that ships under their flag comply with its requirements, and a number of certificates are prescribed in the Convention as proof that this has been done.

Control provisions also allow Contracting Governments to inspect ships of other Contracting States if there are clear grounds for believing that the ship and its equipment do not substantially comply with the requirements of the Convention - this procedure is known as Port State Control. This also covers MARPOL, ISPS and MLC.

SOLAS Amendments 1st July 2014

New requirements under the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) to require all ships to have plans and procedures to recover persons from the water are among a set of SOLAS amendments entering into force on 1 July 2014.

Recovery of Persons from the Water

The SOLAS amendments, adopted in 2012, were developed as part of the International Maritime Organization (IMO)'s work on large passenger ship safety and are aimed at ensuring all ships have the capability to effectively serve as a rescue asset and have the right equipment to be able to rescue persons from the water and from survival craft, in the event of an incident.

This new requirement is intended to enhance safety at sea and also to provide support to search and rescue coordinators in all types of rescue operations and, particularly, in those situations where there is insufficient dedicated search and rescue capacity or access to helicopters and specialized rescue craft is limited.

The ship's plans and procedures should take into account related Guidelines for the development of plans and procedures for recovery of persons from the water (MSC.1/Circ.1447).

Ships constructed before 1 July 2014 are required to comply with the requirement by the first periodical or renewal safety equipment survey of the ship to be carried out after 1 July 2014, whichever comes first.

The implementation of the requirements on ships to which SOLAS does not apply is encouraged under a related MSC resolution, also adopted in 2012, which invites SOLAS Contracting Governments to determine to what extent the requirements should apply to: cargo ships of a gross tonnage below 500 engaged on any voyage; cargo ships of a gross tonnage of 500 and above not engaged on international voyages; passenger ships not engaged on international voyages; fishing vessels; high-speed craft; dynamically supported craft; special purpose ships; and mobile offshore drilling units.

Reducing On-board Noise

Also entering into force on 1 July 2014 is the new SOLAS regulation II-1/3-12, which requires new ships to be constructed to reduce on-board noise and to protect personnel from noise, in accordance with the revised Code on noise levels on board ships, which sets out mandatory maximum noise level limits for machinery spaces, control rooms, workshops, accommodation and other spaces on board ships.

Fire-fighter Communication On-board

Amendments to SOLAS regulation II-2/10 on fire fighting enter into force on 1 July 2014, to require a minimum of two two-way portable radiotelephone apparatus for each fire party for fire fighters' communication to be carried. The apparatus shall be of an explosion-proof type or intrinsically safe. Ships constructed before 1 July 2014 shall comply with the above requirements not later than the first survey after 1 July 2018.

Instructions, On-board Training and Drills

Further amendments to regulation II-2/15 on instructions, on-board training and drills require an on-board means of recharging breathing apparatus cylinders used during drills, or a suitable number of spare cylinders.

Forms of Certificates and Records of Equipment

Other amendments to the appendix to the annex to the SOLAS Convention replace all forms of certificates and records of equipment, including its 1988 Protocol, and further amendments relate to the forms of the Cargo Ship Safety Construction Certificate and Cargo Ship Safety Equipment Certificate of its 1978 Protocol.