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**'MANILA STATEMENT' ISSUED AT IMO MEET TO ENHANCE SAFETY OF PASSENGER FERRIES**

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) Conference on the 'enhancement of safety of ships carrying passengers on non-international voyages' held recently at the Philippine International Convention Center (PICC), Pasay City, Metro Manila, has adopted guidelines to aid the process of reducing the mounting toll of accidents involving such vessels by addressing the question of, 'whether the ship is fit for purpose in its intended role', said DOTC Secretary Joseph Emilio Aguinaldo Abaya and MARINA Administrator Dr. Maximo Q Mejia, Jr.

Prominently described as the "Manila Statement" by the Conference, whose delegates come from IMO -Member States, with observers representing respected groups of stakeholders, other government and non-government organizations, the Statement refers to the Conference's acknowledgment of the 'urgent need' to enhance the safety of such kind of ships in certain parts of the world and urges the States to 'review and update' national regulations in relation to their passenger ferries and to apply the guidelines in order to 'address the unacceptable loss of life and damage to the environment and property due to marine casualties and incidents involving such vessels.

"Domestic ferry operations played a crucial role in the movement of people and goods, and sometime represented as the only possible and/or reasonably affordable means of transport", IMO Secretary-General Koji Sekimizu told delegates and observers at the said Philippine-hosted conference held April 24, 2015 at the historic and landmark PICC. The Conference was attended by representatives from IMO member nations: Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Canada, China, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Norway, Papua New Guinea, host Philippines, and Republic of Korea, and Secretariat of the Pacific Community; as well as observers from the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS), the International Association of Classification Societies (IACS), the Interferry, and the Worldwide Ferry Safety Association (WFSA), World Maritime University (WMU) and the University of Strathclyde, United Kingdom.

“The public expects safety standards on domestic passenger ferries to be as strong as those on international vessels’, Sekimizu stressed, adding that “the perils of the sea do not distinguish between ships engaged on international or non-international voyages and the protection of life at sea is a ‘moral obligation’. ‘Those travelling by domestic ferries should enjoy the highest applicable standard of safety irrespective of their citizenship”, according to the IMO chief..

The ‘Manila Statement’ highlighted that the safety of domestic ferries is the ‘shared responsibility’ between and among Governments, local authorities, ship owners, ship managers, ship operators, shipboard personnel, maritime education and training institutions, classification societies and organizations which governments authorize to ‘survey and certify’ domestic ferries for compliance with the applicable laws, regulations and rules, insurance providers, ports authorities, port terminal owners and operators, and the public and civil society as users of the services provided.

Sekimizu likewise pointed out that “casualties and incidents involving domestic ferries can be avoided if adequate laws, regulations and rules are developed and ‘effectively implemented and enforced’.

‘Manila Statement’ strongly recommended the use of Guidelines on the safe operations of coastal and interisland passenger ships on non-international voyages. The guidelines addressed issues on the purchase of ‘second hand’ ships intended to enter into service as ‘domestic passenger ships, that concerns on change in operating limits, the conversion or modification of a ship before it enters into service as a domestic passenger ships; passenger counting and voyage planning. The guidelines can also be used to check the operation of ships which are already providing passenger service; passenger counting and voyage planning in their daily operations.

The Statement also urges States which need technical assistance on matters relating to the operations of domestic ferries to seek such assistance from IMO or from other States. .

Since 2006, activities on domestic ferries have been pursued in partnership with the Interferry, an international non-governmental organization. A series of fora on safety of domestic ferries in the East Asia sub-region and Pacific Island countries and territories were conducted, and saw the implementation of a national pilot project in Bangladesh, which included the development of specific training programs.

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