



To the Heads of State / Heads of Government of EU/EEA Member States

Brussels / London, 31 March 2015

HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN MEDITERRANEAN SEA

We are writing on behalf of the European Community Shipowners' Associations (ECESA) and the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS), which together represent the European and global shipping industries and over 80% of the world merchant fleet.

This letter is co-signed by the European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF) and the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), which together represent the majority of seafarers serving on the world's ships. Our message is additionally supported by the following shipping organisations which represent various sectors of the industry: BIMCO, Intercargo, Interferry, InterManager, Intertanko and the World Shipping Council.

The humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean Sea is spiralling out of control. According to UNHCR, at least 3,500 people lost their lives during 2014 while attempting to cross the Mediterranean from North Africa. There is a terrible risk of further catastrophic loss of life as ever-more desperate people attempt this deadly sea crossing.

While the navies and coastguards of those EU Member States on the front line in the Mediterranean have made impressive efforts to respond to the crisis, the shipping industry believes that all EU and EEA Member States have a collective responsibility to prevent the loss of thousands more lives, as hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees seek to escape to Europe in boats that are unfit for purpose. The need to act immediately is pressing and urgent.

Merchant ships rescued around 40,000 people during 2014 according to UNHCR. But this number is predicted to increase dramatically during 2015 if the political situation in Africa and the Middle East does not improve. The situation is now so serious that we believe that all Member States need to become far more engaged.

In short, we believe it is unacceptable that the international community is increasingly relying on merchant ships and seafarers to undertake more and more large-scale rescues, with single ships having to rescue as many 500 people at a time. Commercial ships are not equipped to undertake such large-scale rescues, which also create serious risks to the safety, health and welfare of ships' crews who should not be expected to deal with such situations.

All EU and EEA Member States have Search and Rescue (SAR) obligations under international law. But as the situation gets worse we believe there must be a commensurate increase in State funded resources for SAR operations to respond to this major humanitarian crisis. In practice this means that all EU Member States need to share the financial burden in order to help prevent thousands more deaths.

While far more needs to be done to prevent the boats used by people smugglers from being able to depart from North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean in the first place, the lawless situation in Libya and Syria makes this very difficult. In the short term, we therefore feel that the immediate priority must be for EU and EEA Member States to increase resources and support for Search and Rescue operations in the Mediterranean, in view of the very large number of potentially dangerous rescues now being conducted by merchant ships; a situation which we believe is becoming untenable.

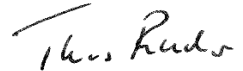
In addition to increasing SAR resources, there is also an urgent need for EU and EEA Member States to develop a political solution. As suggested by UNHCR and other UN agencies, including the International Maritime Organization, the shipping industry believes that the EU and the international community need to provide refugees and migrants with alternative means of finding safety without risking their lives by crossing the Mediterranean in unseaworthy boats.

We respectfully urge the Government to treat the development of solutions to this serious problem as an absolute priority. It is literally a matter of life and death. Moreover, we request that this issue should be added, as a matter of utmost urgency, to the agenda of the European Council and to that of the next relevant meetings of the EU Council of Ministers, including Foreign Affairs, Justice and Home Affairs, and Transport.

While these comments address the immediate crisis unfolding in the Mediterranean, the movement of large numbers of migrants to Europe by sea has been, and is likely to be a challenge affecting other regions, requiring an appropriate collective response.

Thank you for giving this very serious and important issue your personal attention.

Yours sincerely,



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