

Strengthening security on the high seas and in world ports: ILO Convention on seafarers' ID card gains new momentum

A growing number of countries have already ratified the ILO's Seafarers' Identity Documents Convention No.185 adopted in 2003 or will do so in the near future. The international Convention came into force in February 2005 and creates the first globally applicable system of biometric identification for secure identity documents for the estimated 1.2 million seafarers in the world. ILO Online reports from Moscow and Jakarta.

Friday 25 January 2008

JAKARTA/MOSCOW (ILO Online) – Last December, Indonesia approved for ratification the ILO's Seafarers' Identity Documents Convention, 2003 (Revised), No. 185.

The Convention requires all ILO member States to recognize the Seafarer Identity Document (SID) thus facilitating the seafarers' admission to their territories for temporary shore leave without visas. Following the September 11, 2001, attacks in New York and Washington D.C., the United Kingdom and the United States did not allow seafarers from several countries, including Indonesia, to go on shore leave in their seaports.

"Allowing seafarers to have shore leave at seaports means that they can go to hospitals for medical treatment, mail letters to their families back home and report on any piracy and smuggling activities to the authorities", the Indonesian Transportation Minister, Jusman Safii Djamal recently told the press.

The new identity document for seafarers allows for the use of a biometric template to turn two fingerprints of a seafarer into an internationally standardized bar code on the document. The Indonesian government will soon issue the first new biometric identity cards for more than 120,000 Indonesian seafarers working on vessels flying both Indonesian and foreign flags.

Besides Indonesia, Nigeria and Pakistan who have ratified the Convention and have begun issuing SIDs, the ILO has so far registered ratifications from 13 countries and one declaration of provisional application while many others have taken steps towards ratification.

In the Russian Federation, President Putin has already signed the ratification decision and the issuance of the new identity documents is expected to start this month. The documents will be issued to crew members of commercial and fishing vessels, and river-sea ships.

"We see this as a major step toward strengthening security measures in the shipping industry", says Alexander Korennoy of the Russian federal agency for sea and river transport. When asked about the reasons of this move, he stresses that it was "equally important for us to protect the rights and freedoms of our seafarers and facilitate their mobility in exercising their job".

The negotiations that concluded with the adoption of ILO Convention No. 185 were held in response to the need for greater global security, while guaranteeing the rights of workers in the shipping fleet, which handles nearly 90 per cent of world trade.

Igor Kovalchuk, first deputy chairman of the Seafarers Union of Russia fully agrees with his employer colleague: "We need to protect our workers. We do not want to face a situation in which Russian seafarers will not be able to compete in the labour market because of the absence of secure documents. We also want to avoid restrictions of their freedom of movement – for example, not being allowed to take shore leave."

The 400,000 Russian maritime workers constitute one-third of the 1.2 million global maritime workforce. About 50,000 Russians work on foreign ships, a category of workers that is obviously most interested in receiving the new documents.

The biometric identity verification system was created in accordance with the ILO Convention No. 185, which Russia approved for ratification in November 2006. The biometric feature, the fingerprint, is based upon "global interoperability", meaning that it must be possible for the fingerprint information on the SID issued in one country to be read correctly by equipment used in another.

"Looking back, we can see how much has been done in the past months, recalls Korennoy. "Budget allocations were made; amendments to five national laws were introduced; ID manufacturers were contracted; 23 issuance points created throughout the country; two federal centers (the main and reserve ones) were established in Moscow; the biometric verification system was tested in a pilot zone".

"Throughout the process we worked closely with our colleagues in Geneva, in order to ensure full conformity of the Russian-made SIDs with the requirement of global interoperability. The final corrections to SIDs were made after our experts' mission to Geneva in August this year", says Korennoy.

"We are very satisfied with our collaboration with the Indonesian and Russian partners on this important issue. In February last year, I visited Russia and could see for myself all the elements of the newly established biometric verification system, including the federal center in Moscow. I visited Indonesia in August last year and also reviewed the operations of central issuing Office in Jakarta. Russia and Indonesia may set a good example for other countries in their respective regions in the implementation of Convention No. 185", says Cleopatra Doumbia-Henry, Director of the ILO's International Labour Standards Department.

This process has already started. In March 2007, a conference was held in St. Petersburg to share Russia's experience in issuing SIDs with the neighboring countries, including Azerbaijan and Ukraine that provide a large number of sea-going maritime personnel.

New biometric documents will be issued to the Russian seafarers upon the expiry of their old identity documents. It is estimated that the replacement process will take five years. Indonesia is expected to begin issuance soon.

"The tragic consequences of terrorism can be aggravated by security measures resulting in hardship for the world's seafarers, including work under detrimental conditions of loss of jobs, and for world shipping in general. This Convention provides an unprecedented international system for identification freely agreed to on behalf of governments, ship owners and seafarers", concludes Doumbia-Henry.