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SEVERE ACUTE RESPIRATORY SYNDROME (SARS)

Introduction

1 This circular is issued following consultations between the Secretary-General and the Chairman of the Maritime Safety Committee. It is based on a submission to the Committee by Singapore (MSC 77/25/8) and aims at increasing awareness about SARS through drawing the Member Governments' attention to the information contained in the document referred to above.

Background

2 On 12 March 2003, the World Health Organization (WHO) alerted the world to cases of atypical pneumonia, now known as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). Since then, the WHO has created a virtual research centre, and established a global network, by which treating physicians can share clinical data on treatments and outcomes.

3 As at 14 April 2003, the WHO reported that a total of 3,619 cases of SARS had been diagnosed, with 144 deaths in 21 countries. These shocking figures have since increased, aggravating the plight of economies and public health. To date, there is no treatment for the disease, only preventive measures that could help stem the spread of SARS.

4 The rapid spread of SARS to several countries is primarily due to the ease of air travel. Countries are now beginning to count the cost of the infection. Health care systems have come under severe strains to cope with reported cases and to prevent the spread of SARS to more people. Business and leisure travel by air has drastically reduced. The economic cost to the travel and leisure industries, and to the economy as a whole is mounting. If the spread of SARS is not controlled, it would have a disastrous effect on the world economy.

5 The spread of SARS is however not limited to air travel. Thousands of ships ply every day between ports, carrying with them seafarers from all nations. Cruise ships, ferries and passenger liners in particular carry large number of passengers and crew on each ship. Should any crew or passenger on board be infected with SARS, the disease could spread quickly on the ship to many persons. This is especially so on a passenger ship. With large number of persons on board, it is also extremely difficult to trace those who have come into contact with the person affected by SARS to control the spread of infection.

6 There is therefore an urgent need for the international shipping community to appreciate the potential danger of the spread of SARS through sea travel and to take the necessary steps to prevent any spread. Countries should be ready to handle incidents of SARS on ships in their ports or arriving in their ports. The bulk of the world seaborne trade is carried by ships and all countries

should do what they could to ensure that this is not disrupted because of SARS. As the United Nations specialized agency responsible for maritime affairs, the Organization is determined to play its role in helping its Member States to fight against the spread of SARS through shipping.

Singapore's response to the SARS challenge

7 Singapore has been affected by SARS and has mounted strenuous efforts nationally to deal with the crisis. The Government has been quick to recognize the problem posed by SARS and acted swiftly to introduce measures to contain the spread of the disease. It has deployed a three-pronged strategy in this regard. First, detect and isolate SARS cases as early as possible. Second, ring-fence detected/suspected cases, as well as hospitals, clinics and personnel treating SARS cases, and adopt robust screening and infection control procedures. Third, contain the spread of the virus and guard vigilantly against an outbreak in the wider community. This strategy has been effective in bringing the situation in Singapore under control. New SARS cases have been limited to close contacts with SARS patients. Singapore's borders remain open and visitors are welcome. The Government has also taken proactive steps to share information and educate the public and private sectors on their social responsibility for containing the spread of SARS.

8 As the busiest port in the world, there are on average more than 400 vessel calls at the Singapore port each day. The calls include large cruise ships that could carry in excess of 2,000 passengers and crew on board. To prevent the spread SARS through the maritime route, the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore (MPA) has also adopted the strategy to isolate, ring-fence and contain infection to deal with the SARS problem. This is done in close co-operation with other government agencies in Singapore to educate and provide advice on preventive measures to the shipping community.

9 The MPA has issued a Health Advisory on SARS* containing information on the outbreak, SARS symptoms and preventive measures to the local shipping community, including foreign ships calling at Singapore. Shipmasters are also required to report to Singapore's Port Health Office prior to the arrival of their ships, whether any crew or passenger is unwell or is experiencing SARS symptoms, so that he can be attended to by a medical doctor at our designated quarantine anchorage. All crew and passengers on board ships are to fill up and submit Health Declaration Cards on arrival in Singapore. The Authority has met with the shipping community to encourage co-operation in stemming the spread of SARS through shipping activities.

10 The MPA had to deal with an actual case of a crew member from a ship suspected of having SARS. The incident involved a cruise ship which arrived in Singapore with nearly 2,000 crew and passengers on board. A crew member was found unwell with a high fever. He was quickly sent to the hospital for examination and subsequently admitted into the hospital as a suspected SARS patient. Additional health screening measures had to be taken to ensure that the passengers and crew whom the crew might have come into contact with on board the ship were fit to travel before they were allowed to leave the ship to resume their journey. As a result of the incident, the cruise line decided to cancel the scheduled cruises and deploy the ship in another region. Fortunately, as it turned out, the unwell crew member had not contracted SARS. The confirmation came too late for the cruise line to resume normal operations. The authorities in Singapore had also had to put in a great deal of efforts to ensure that the passengers and crew could be safely disembarked and repatriated.

* See annex to document MSC 77/25/8.

The Way Forward

11 Singapore's experience with the cruise ship underscores the importance of comprehensive procedures in place to deal with incidents of a ship with a crew member or passenger infected or suspected to be infected with SARS. The procedures are necessary to detect and isolate suspected SARS cases to prevent the spread of the disease. The isolation or treatment of some crew would mean the need to have replacement crew in order that the ship could resume trading. Otherwise the ship could be stranded in the port together with the cargo. If the incident occurs on a passenger ship, the need to deal with large number of people would put a severe strain on the health-care system.

12 While there are still many unknowns about SARS, there is much information and experience Member Governments may be able to share to develop guidelines and advisories on preventive measures and response procedures and capabilities for the shipping community.

13 Member Governments and international organizations concerned are requested to bring this circular to the attention of all concerned.
