



MARITIME AND PORT AUTHORITY OF SINGAPORE

PORT MARINE CIRCULAR
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Shipping Community
Harbour Craft Community

PROPER USE OF VHF CHANNELS AT SEA

1 The International Maritime Organisation (IMO) has recognized that the proper use of VHF radio communications contributes to safety of life at sea and efficiency of navigation. Any misuse of VHF communication channels may cause serious interference with essential communications and might cause potential dangers to safety at sea.

2 In relation to the above, IMO has on 5 Dec 2003 adopted resolution [A.23/Res 954](#) with an Annex containing guidelines on the use proper use of VHF channels at sea. A copy of this resolution and its Annex are attached.

3 In pursuant to Regulation 27 of the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore (Port) Regulations (1997), the Port Master hereby directs that with immediate effect, Masters and watch-keeping officers of vessels in Singapore port waters are to observe the guidelines stated in IMO resolution A.23/Res 954 on the Proper Use of VHF Channels at Sea. They are to take note of paragraph 1.7 of the guidelines on "communications with coast stations" and on receiving instructions from VTIS to stop transmitting, no further communication should be made until otherwise notified. Ships navigating in the Singapore Strait are also advised to observe these IMO guidelines.

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IMO

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ASSEMBLY
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**Adopted on 5 December 2003
(Agenda item 17)**

PROPER USE OF VHF CHANNELS AT SEA

THE ASSEMBLY,

RECALLING Article 15(j) of the Convention on the International Maritime Organization concerning the functions of the Assembly in relation to regulations and guidelines concerning maritime safety,

RECOGNIZING that proper use of VHF radiocommunication channels contributes to safety of life at sea and efficiency of navigation,

RECOGNIZING ALSO that misuse of VHF radiocommunication channels may cause serious interference with essential communications and might cause potential dangers to safety at sea,

CONSIDERING that the risk of misuse of VHF radiocommunication channels is more likely when VHF equipment is operated by persons not trained in its proper use,

RECALLING that the Radio Regulations* require that the service of every ship radio-telephone station should be controlled by an operator holding a certificate issued or recognized by the Government concerned,

RECALLING ALSO that, for the certification of masters, chief mates and officers in charge of a navigational watch, the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers, 1978, as amended in 1995, requires knowledge of procedures used in radiotelephone communications and the ability to use radiotelephones, in particular with respect to distress, urgency, safety and navigational messages,

HAVING CONSIDERED the recommendation made by the Maritime Safety Committee at its seventy-fifth session,

* Radio Regulations means the Radio Regulations annexed to, or regarded as being annexed to, the most recent International Telecommunications Convention which is in force at any time.

1. ADOPTS the Guidelines on the use of VHF at sea as set out in the annex to the present resolution;
2. INVITES Governments to ensure that all persons on board controlling the operation of VHF equipment have knowledge of the procedures used in radiotelephone communications and the ability to use radiotelephones, in particular with respect to distress, urgency, safety and navigational messages;
3. INVITES ALSO Governments to bring the annexed Guidelines to the attention of all concerned;
4. INVITES FURTHER Governments to take appropriate action to ensure that VHF channels are used correctly;
5. AUTHORIZES the Maritime Safety Committee to keep these Guidelines under review and amend them as appropriate;
6. REVOKES resolution A.474 (XII).

ANNEX

GUIDELINES ON THE USE OF VHF AT SEA

1 VHF COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUE

1.1 Preparation

Before transmitting, think about the subjects which have to be communicated and, if necessary, prepare written notes to avoid unnecessary interruptions and ensure that no valuable time is wasted on a busy channel.

1.2 Listening

Listen before commencing to transmit to make certain that the channel is not already in use. This will avoid unnecessary and irritating interference.

1.3 Discipline

VHF equipment should be used correctly and in accordance with the Radio Regulations. The following in particular should be avoided:

- .1 calling on channel 16 for purposes other than distress, urgency and very brief safety communications when another channel is available;
- .2 communications not related to safety and navigation on port operation channels;
- .3 non-essential transmissions, e.g. needless and superfluous signals and correspondence;
- .4 transmitting without correct identification;
- .5 occupation of one particular channel under poor conditions; and
- .6 use of offensive language.

1.4 Repetition

Repetition of words and phrases should be avoided unless specifically requested by the receiving station.

1.5 Power reduction

When possible, the lowest transmitter power necessary for satisfactory communication should be used.

1.6 Automatic identification system (AIS)

AIS is used for the exchange of data in ship-to-ship communications and also in communication with shore-based facilities. The purpose of AIS is to help identify vessels; assist in target tracking; simplify information exchange (e.g. reduce verbal reporting); and provide additional information to assist situation awareness. AIS may be used together with VHF voice communications. AIS should be operated in accordance with resolution A.917(22), as amended by resolution A.956(23) on Guidelines for the onboard operational use of shipborne automatic identification systems (AISs).

1.7 Communications with coast stations

1.7.1 On VHF channels allocated to port operations service, the only messages permitted are restricted to those relating to the operational handling, the movement and the safety of ships and, in emergency, to the safety of persons; as the use of these channels for ship-to-ship communications may cause serious interference to communications related to the movement and safety of shipping in port areas.

1.7.2 Instructions given on communication matters by shore stations should be obeyed.

1.7.3 Communications should be carried out on the channel indicated by the coast station. When a change of channel is requested, this should be acknowledged by the ship.

1.7.4 On receiving instructions from a coast station to stop transmitting, no further communication should be made until otherwise notified (the coast station may be receiving distress or safety messages and any other transmissions could cause interference).

1.8 Communications with other ships

1.8.1 VHF channel 13 is designated by the Radio Regulations for bridge-to-bridge communications. The ship called may indicate another working channel on which further transmissions should take place. The calling ship should acknowledge acceptance before changing channels.

1.8.2 The listening procedure outlined in paragraph 1.2 should be followed before communications are commenced on the chosen channel.

1.9 Distress communications

1.9.1 Distress calls/messages have absolute priority over all other communications. When receiving them all other transmissions should cease and a listening watch should be kept.

1.9.2 Any distress call/message should be recorded in the ship's log and passed to the master.

1.9.3 On receipt of a distress message, if in the vicinity, immediately acknowledge receipt. If not in the vicinity, allow a short interval of time to elapse before acknowledging receipt of the message in order to permit ships nearer to the distress to do so.

1.10 Calling

1.10.1 In accordance with the Radio Regulations channel 16 may only be used for distress, urgency and very brief safety communications and for calling to establish other communications which should then be conducted on a suitable working channel.

1.10.2 Whenever possible, a working frequency should be used for calling.

If a working frequency is not available, VHF channel 16 may be used for calling, provided it is not occupied by a distress and urgency call/message.

1.10.3 In case of a difficulty in establishing contact with a ship or a coast station, allow adequate time before repeating the call. Do not occupy the channel unnecessarily and try another channel.

1.11 Changing channels

If communications on a channel are unsatisfactory, indicate change of channel and await confirmation.

1.12 Spelling

If spelling becomes necessary (e.g. descriptive names, call signs, words that could be misunderstood) use the spelling table contained in the International Code of Signals, the Radio Regulations and the IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP).

1.13 Addressing

The words "I" and "YOU" should be used prudently. Indicate to whom they refer.

Example:

"Seaship, this is Port Radar, Port Radar, do you have a pilot?"

Port Radar, this is Seaship, I do have a pilot."

1.14 Watchkeeping

Every ship, while at sea, is required to maintain watches (Regulation on Watches in Chapter IV of SOLAS, 1974, as amended). Continuous watchkeeping is required on VHF DSC channel 70 and also when practicable, a continuous listening watch on VHF channel 16.

2 VHF COMMUNICATION PROCEDURES

2.1 Calling

When calling a coast station or another ship, say the name of that coast station once (twice if considered necessary in heavy radio traffic conditions) followed by the phrase THIS IS and the ship's name twice, indicating the channel in use.

Example:

"Port City, this is Seastar, Seastar, on Channel 14."

2.2 Exchange of messages

2.2.1 When communicating with a ship whose name is unknown but whose position is known, that position may be used. In this case the call is addressed to all ships.

Example:

"Hello all ships, this is Pastoria, Pastoria. Ship approaching number four buoy, I am passing Belinda Bank Light."

2.2.2 Where a message is received and only acknowledgement of receipt is needed, say "received". Where a message is received and acknowledgement of the correct message is required, say "received, understood", and repeat message if considered necessary.

Example:

"Message: Your berth will be clear at 08.30 hours.

Reply: Received, understood. Berth clear at 08.30 hours."

2.2.3 Where appropriate, the following message should be sent:

"Please use/ I will use the IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases".

When language difficulties exist which cannot be resolved by use of the IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases, the International Code of Signals should be used.

In this case, the word "INTERCO" should precede the groups of the International Code of Signals.

Example:

"Please use/I will use the International Code of Signals".

2.2.4 Where the message contains instructions or advice, the substance should be repeated in the reply.

Example:

"Message: Advise you pass astern of me.

Reply: I will pass astern of you."

2.2.5 If a message is not properly received, ask for it to be repeated by saying "Say again".

2.2.6 If a message is received but not understood, say "Message not understood".

2.2.7 If it is necessary to change to a different channel say "Change to channel" and wait for acknowledgement before carrying out the change.

2.2.8 During exchange of messages, a ship should invite a reply by saying "over".

2.2.9 The end of a communication is indicated by the word "out".

3 STANDARD MESSAGES

3.1 Since most ship-to-shore communications are exchanges of information, it is advisable to use standard messages which will reduce transmission time.

3.2 Commonly used standard messages are given in the IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) , which should be used whenever possible.

Reference documents

- 1974 SOLAS Convention, as amended, chapter IV on Radiocommunications.
- Radio Regulations, Appendix 18, Table of Transmitting Frequencies in the VHF Maritime Mobile Band.
- Resolution A.917(22), as amended by resolution A.956(23) on Guidelines for the onboard operational use of shipborne automatic identification systems (AISs).
- Resolution A.918(22) on IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP).