



Insight Article

Refugees – rescuing refugees at sea

Unseaworthy vessels overcrowded with people trying to escape extreme poverty, war, political persecution and famine have become a more familiar sight in some parts of the world.

Published 20 August 2006

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The scale of the problem is hard to measure, as tragically many ships and bodies disappear into the sea, often as a result of unscrupulous people smugglers.

Shipowners and crew encountering refugees at sea need to be familiar with their obligations in such situations and the actions they should take. Maritime conventions, e.g. SOLAS, adopted by most nations worldwide place clear obligations on seafarers who come across people/ships in distress at sea to provide assistance - irrespective of their nationality, status or the circumstances in which they are found.

Once it becomes clear that a vessel will be involved in picking up refugees, the master should contact the ship owner and Gard or its local correspondent. Gard will provide guidance on cover and do its utmost to ensure a smooth and efficient disembarkation. This will benefit the refugees and limit the delay to the ship.

This page aims to help by providing some useful sources of information on rescuing refugees at sea.

General issues:

Search and rescue obligations
Gard Alert: Readiness for rescue at sea more important than ever
Large scale rescue operations at sea by International Chamber of Shipping
Rescue at Sea – a guide to principles and practice as applied to refugees and migrants by the IMO, ICS and UNHCR
Gardantsign the IMO ICS and UNHCR Cover and assistance
Gard Guidance to Masters: Refugees - Section 3.13
Norwegian Shipowners Association's Guidelines on migrants at sea - large scale
SA operations - blog on significant maritime migration routes

Migrant smuggling
IMO Briefing August 2015 condemning migrant smuggling
IMO Briefing December 2014 on addressing irregular maritime migration

Help for refugees
The UN Refugee Agency: UNHCR

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