

This article, by kind permission of Lloyd's List and the author, Cachalot Michael Grey, appeared in his Viewpoint column on 16th March 2015.

Another humanitarian crisis in a world already overloaded with them, it is one of those issues that demands that 'something must be done', but by whom, and how?

In our modest way we can but bring it to your attention.

The piece will appear in the next edition of The Cachalot.

Lloyd's List Viewpoint 16 March 15

High level answers needed

Nobody shouted, or banged their fists on the lectern, although it was a situation of life and death, with a great deal of the latter. There had been 3,500 "known" fatalities last year and goodness knows how many that the sea had just swallowed up on their perilous passages across the Mediterranean. But it could just have been another ordinary IMO meeting, with sober statements being given by distinguished delegates, heard in silence, or perhaps a round of muted applause.

Except that this was a "high level meeting to address unsafe mixed migration by sea" which is arguably one of the great crises of our times, which accounted for the presence of senior representatives of all the United Nations agencies. Refugees, Drugs and Crime, Human Rights, Development, Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea, Migration were all present and correct. Only Interpol was absent.

IMO Secretary General Koji Sekimizu spoke with some passion of the "tidal wave" of people, the systems of search and rescue and maritime safety, which are certainly not designed to rescue hundreds of thousands of people - "at breaking point". It was, he said "a huge and multi-faceted problem".

As the high level representatives soberly gave their respective addresses, it was not difficult to register a sense of unreality at what was happening just 1500 miles to the south, that very day, just as on every other day for more than a year, as the Syrian catastrophe unfolded, terror spread into Iraq and Libya descended into armed anarchy. Never, since the end of WWII, we were told, had there been so many desperate refugees on the move, driven by terror or want.

The sheer statistics are awesome. More than 200,000 desperate "migrants" (does that word really convey what is driving them) rescued in 2014, as they struggled to reach Europe in their mostly unsafe craft. Some 650 merchant ships diverted and rescuing 40,000 people, with even greater numbers diverting to assist. The numbers rising all the time, with 370 known deaths in the first two months of this year, with 7,500 brought to safety, in the winter season, when prudence might have suggested all the dangers are multiplied by the weather.

The forecasts are even more frightening. The International Chamber of Shipping's Peter Hinchcliffe pointed out that if the trajectory of increase continues, this year will see up to 450,000 people risking their lives and having to be rescued. Simple arithmetic, suggests Mr Sekimizu would see six merchant ships in action every day, each rescuing 200 migrants. Just to think about these numbers for a minute and you begin to grasp the magnitude of what we smoothly refer to as a "challenge".

It is more than a challenge, when a big merchant ship, say a laden VLCC, sights a ramshackle craft heaving with humanity and rolling around in a choppy sea. There will be around 20 seafarers aboard the rescuing craft, trained to operate a huge tanker, not to drag babes in arms, women and children, the old and infirm, the panic stricken and the sick onto their ship, keep them safe and get them to land. There may be infectious diseases among their passengers, a good deal worse if the threats of terrorists to infiltrate into Europe are realised.

And we are approaching this crisis with no Mare Nostrum operation; the Italians unprepared to soldier on alone, despite the heroics of their navy and coastguard, and a far smaller EU effort, holding the fort, backed up by all those merchant ships, which seem likely to constitute the heavy lifting in the months to come. We are told the smugglers are getting more violent, arms being seen at sea, migrants shot to ensure their compliance and the worrying cases of the unmanned merchant ships packed with people, running like unguided missiles across a busy sea. Some 700 people paying \$5000 per head nets a cool \$3.2m, providing a convincing business case for the smugglers, who can obtain a beaten up old "ghost ship" for a fraction of this sum.

But what can be done in the short term? Of course there is a need for data, possibly an effort to get to grips with the smugglers, but the terrible events that are pushing these people show no signs whatever of

improvement. Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan are bursting at the seams with refugees from the conflict in Syria, desperate people are escaping from Africa; 9000 every month crossing into the Arabian peninsula and the Sahara becoming a graveyard.

They are going to keep on coming; more seafarers will find themselves engaged in rescue missions, often hazarding their own lives to undertake their missions of mercy. How can these desperate people be persuaded not to trust their lives to the smugglers and criminals, when they see no other alternative? Would an “awareness campaign” fulfil any purpose whatsoever?

Logic, sense and seamanship would suggest that if they are so desperate, so determined to escape, a civilised response would be to provide a legitimate way of reaching safety, aboard ferries. When, of course, politics would immediately intrude with shouts of horror at the very notion of legitimising and civilising what people seem to tolerate as long as it remains illegitimate, hazardous beyond belief and kills thousands each year.

So, where do we go from here? All the agencies are fully aware of the scale of this emergency, which is what it is and the fact that all the horrors that drive these migrations are getting worse in a worryingly unstable world. The ICS booklet which gives guidance on ensuring the safety and security of seafarers and rescued persons (filled with sensible and practical advice) contains within it a truly horrifying illustration of a grossly overloaded fishing boat, laden with hundreds of migrants, some of whom are jumping into the sea, appearing to be at the point of capsizing. This is the reality in 2015, multiplied hundreds and hundreds of times.

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