Mick Bloor and his Seafarers International Research centre collaborator, Prof Ramesh Datta, say a port state control inspector should be a welcome visitor on board ships

On modern ships with their reduced crew levels and quick port turnovers, visitors from the port can sometimes be an unwelcome distraction. Especially for senior officers already grappling with the problems of loading and discharging, the procession up the gangway of ship inspectors, class surveyors, superintendents, port health inspectors should be a welcome visitor on board ships. However, even in European countries where there is a commitment to inspect one ship every 24 hours, the chances of a substandard ship escaping unreported are a good deal stronger when the ship docks at the weekend or at ports, the chances of a substandard ship escaping unreported are a good deal stronger when the ship docks at the weekend or at one of the smaller ports. First and foremost, the effectiveness of port state control varies from port to port. There are well-documented instances in some ports where the visit of the port-state control inspector is simply an exercise in extortion of money, gifts or bribes. Some vessels routinely carry extra supplies of cigarettes and spirits, or 14 hours of work and minimum hours of rest. Where the inspector judges those standards are not being met, then he or she can require that they are improved. And of course, for serious breaches in standards, the inspector has the power to detain the ship in port until the deficiencies have been cleared. The inspector’s power of detention is a major deterrent to ship operators tempted to underpay and overwork their crews. Yet even in four of all foreign-flagged ships entering European ports, the chances of a substandard ship escaping without inspection are a good deal stronger when the ship docks at the weekend or at one of the smaller ports. It is also the case that not all inspectors take seafarers’ health and welfare issues equally seriously. In our recently completed international study of port state control, one inspector ignore the fact that the galley wasn’t tidy, the food was swarming with flies, only to ask if the cook knew how to fight a galley fire. In contrast, a UK inspector recently detained a ship because they refused to supply proper bedding to the crew (and quite right too: why should any crew have to cross the North Atlantic in winter without proper blankets?). But even where inspectors are acting to protect crews’ health and welfare, they sometimes find the international regulations themselves are insufficient to protect crews from injury and ill-health. It’s not that enforcement of regulations is poor, it’s that the regulations themselves are weak. This is arguably the case for international regulations on seafarer fatigue. The current regulations issued by the International Labour Organization (ILO) provide nothing in the way of a warm welcome to the seafarer’s friend; the person who can protect the seafarer from unsupervisory operators who put profit before safety and before decent living and working conditions. But does the inspector should be assured of the port state control visit being carried out in the UK (Photo: Maritime and Coastguard Agency)

A PORT state control inspection being carried out in the UK (Photo: Maritime and Coastguard Agency)