

THE SIRC COLUMN



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 turnarounds, 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 superintendents, port health inspectors, class surveyors, agents and others, can be a bit of a headache – not least when their arrival kills the officer's hopes of nipping along to the cabin for a few hours of well-earned shut-eye. But one port

visitor who should be welcome is the port-state control inspector. This inspector is responsible for seeing that the ship is complying with international ship standards, not just standards in respect of ship structures and equipment, but also health and safety standards, such as maximum 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 breach standards and regulations: even a short port detention can cost an operator many thousands of dollars in extra berthing fees, repairs, re-equipment and, most importantly, lost revenue.

So, in principle, the



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

inspector should be assured of a warm welcome as the seafarer's friend; the person who can protect the seafarer from unscrupulous operators who put profit before safety and before decent living and working conditions. But does

port-state control actually provide this protection to the seafarer? How effective is port state control?

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 officer is simply an exercise in extortion of money, gifts or both. Some ships routinely carry extra supplies of cigarettes and spirits expressly for this purpose. Port state control is better resourced in some parts of the world than others, so that foreign-flagged ships are much more likely to be inspected in North America, Europe and the Asia-Pacific countries than in other areas. However, even in European countries where there is a commitment to inspect one 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 we saw one inspector ignore the fact that the galley was filthy and the food was swarming with flies, only to ask the cook if he knew how to fight a galley fire. In contrast, a UK inspector recently detained a ship because the operators were refusing 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 committed to protecting 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 Organisation in Geneva, the UN agency responsible for regulating working conditions, allow maximum hours of work for seafarers to be 14 hours in any 24-hour period, or 72 hours in any seven-day period. While the hours of rest should be: not less than 10 hours in any 24-hour period, or not less than 77 hours in any seven-day period. Further, those 10 hours of rest can't be divided into more than two periods of rest and one of those should last at least six hours. This is a bit complicated. But those readers good at mental arithmetic will already have realised that these international regulations allow ship operators to require crews to operate continual 6 + 6 watches. A port state control inspector recently inspected an elderly bulker without an automated engine room where

the two Polish engineers were being required to work six hours on and six hours off for the entire duration of their contracts. The inspector was appalled to discover there was absolutely nothing in the international regulations which would allow him to prevent this exploitation.

In some parts of the world port state control inspectors are poorly paid. They are sometimes subject to intimidation and other pressures. A chief inspector was recently murdered. They work with limited resources. They also work with limited information about conditions on board, and seafarers are quite rightly afraid to complain about their living and working conditions to visiting inspectors. But there seems little doubt that conditions for seafarers could be much worse if port state control inspectors were not among the occasional irritating visitors in ships' crowded port schedules.