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COMMITTEE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRADE

Working Party on Facilitation of
International Trade Procedures

Meeting of Experts on Procedures and
Documentation (GE.2)
(Fifty-fifth session, 18-19 March 1997
Item 4(b) of the provisional agenda)

Revision of ECE/FAL Recommendation No.10
"Ships' Codes"

Note by the secretariat

In order to ascertain the needs and preferences of the shipping industry in respect of standard codes for identifying ships, the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) conducted a research during 1995-96, the results of which were presented to the forty-fourth session of WP.4 in September 1996 (document TRADE/WP.4/R.1253). On the basis of the proposal made by ICS to use the International Maritime Organization's Ship Identification Number Scheme for the unique identification of ships, WP.4 agreed to request the secretariat to prepare a new revised version of the Recommendation with the new name "Codes for the Identification of Ships" in the official format which is in the Annex to this document.

ANNEX

United Nations
Economic Commission for Europe

Codes for the Identification of Ships

Recommendation No. 10, second edition, adopted by the
Working Party on Facilitation of International Trade Procedures

Geneva, September 1996

Preamble

At its seventh session in February 1978, the Working Party on Facilitation of International Trade Procedures adopted Recommendation No. 10 entitled "Codes for Ships' Names" (Document Trade/WP.4/INF.52). It recommended that the International Telecommunication Union Radio Call Signs (IRCS) for ship stations should be used, on a provisional basis, whenever a coded representation of the names of ships is desirable.

Two proposals, for abolishing and revising this Recommendation, were presented to the forty-first session of WP.4 in March 1995. In order to ascertain the needs and preferences of the shipping industry in respect of standard codes for identifying ships, the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) conducted a research during 1995, the results of which were presented to the forty-third session of WP.4 in March 1996 (Document TRADE/WP.4/R.1201). This revision of Recommendation No. 10 is based on the findings of this research.

Recommendation

The Working Party on Facilitation of International Trade Procedures, at its forty-fourth session in September 1996, agreed to recommend to participants in international trade including ship owners, port authorities and other parties involved in maritime transport of goods:

- (i) to use the International Maritime Organisation's Ship Identification Number Scheme for the unique identification of ships;
- (ii) to use only the final seven characters of the IMO number in EDI applications.

The session was attended by representatives from: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovak Republic, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America. Representatives from: Australia, Brazil, Gabon, Japan, Korea, participated under Article 11 of the Commission's terms of reference.

The session was attended by representatives of the European Union (EU).

The session was also attended by representatives of the secretariat of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL), as well as by representatives of the following intergovernmental organizations: European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and the World Customs Organization (WCO). The following non-governmental organizations were represented: International Air Transport Association (IATA), International Association of Ports and Harbours (IAPH), International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), International Chamber of Shipping (ICS), International Express Carriers Conference (IECC), International Organization for Standardization (ISO), Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (S.W.I.F.T.), and the United Towns Agency for North-South Cooperation. Also present at the invitation of the secretariat was a representative of the International Federation of Inspection Agencies (IFIA) and of the North American Trade Procedures Organization (NATPRO).

CODES FOR THE IDENTIFICATION OF SHIPS

I. Background

1. The first version of this Recommendation was cast in terms of establishing a code for representing ships' names. Plain language names were felt to be excessively long. Moreover, they are not always unique as, in many cases, several vessels bear the same name and sometimes sail under the same flag.

2. The need for a coded representation of ships' names is no longer so apparent. Indeed, the intrinsic value of a coded representation of a ship's name is not obvious. Just as ships' plain language names are not unique, coded representations of them would also not be unique to specific ships. With transmissions of ships' full names in free text being no longer financially prohibitive, there is no longer seen to be any added value in encoding plain language names.

3. There is clear value, however, in a set of unique codes for identifying ships. The particulars of a ship may be required for a number of documents and EDI messages used in international trade. Several of these particulars remain constant throughout the ship's lifetime. Rather than repeat all of them in every data transmission pertaining to the ship, it would therefore be more satisfactory to transmit a single identifier code for the ship which would then be used to reference the necessary particulars from a database. This revision of Recommendation No. 10 is accordingly cast in terms of establishing a set of unique codes for the identification of ships, rather than for representing their names.

4. Studies undertaken within the shipping industry have shown that ships are presently identified in a number of different ways within the control systems of individual shipping lines. These include lines' own bespoke codes, the ship's full name, an abbreviation of the ship's name, the ship's Radio Call Sign, and the ship's Lloyd's Register number (from which the IMO number is derived).

5. The same studies showed a requirement for an international standard set of unique codes. The IMO Number and the Radio Call Sign are endorsed by an intergovernmental organisation - the International Maritime Organisation and the International Telecommunication Union, respectively.

6. Both the IMO Number and the Radio Call Sign represent such a set of unique codes and both encompass a very extensive proportion of the world's fleet of trading ships. The Radio Call Sign, however, derives from the ship's nationality and therefore changes when a ship is transferred from one national register to another. Only the IMO Number always remains unchanged throughout the life of a ship irrespective of changes of name, nationality or ownership. There is therefore a preference within the shipping industry for the IMO Number to serve as the official international standard.

II. Scope and Field of Application

7. The scope and field of application of the IMO Ship Identification Number Scheme is to provide a scheme for the unique identification of ships. Its stated purpose is to enhance maritime safety and pollution prevention and to facilitate the prevention of maritime fraud.

8. The IMO Ship Identification Number Scheme was first adopted on a voluntary basis on 19 November 1987, with the intention that a ship's IMO number should be inserted on its Certificate of Registry and other certificates issued under IMO Conventions.

9. The application of the IMO Ship Identification Number Scheme became mandatory with the coming into force on 1 January 1996 of Regulation 3 of Chapter IX of the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) which provides for:

- all passenger ships of 100 gross tonnage and upwards and all cargo ships of 300 gross tonnage and upwards to be provided with an IMO number;

- the ship's IMO number to be inserted on the following certificates and certified copies thereof:

- . Passenger Ship Safety Certificate,
- . Cargo Ship Safety Construction Certificate,
- . Cargo Ship Safety Equipment Certificate,
- . Cargo Ship Safety Radio Certificate,
- . Exemption Certificate.

10. For ships constructed before 1 January 1996, this regulation takes effect when a certificate is renewed on or after 1 January 1996.

III. Code Structure and Maintenance

11. The structure of the IMO number comprises two parts: a variable seven-digit numeric number (the Lloyd's Register number) and a constant alpha prefix "IMO" (eg IMO 1234567).

12. It is therefore recommended, on grounds of efficiency, that only the variable seven-digit numeric element of the IMO number be used in EDI transmissions. The constant 3-alpha prefix by definition does not contribute to the identification of the ship.

13. The seven-digit numeric number is maintained by the Lloyd's Register which may assign a number to a ship at any time following the initiation of its construction.

IV. Sources for Reference

14. The following sources may be used for referencing the IMO number:

- The Register of Ships and the 11 cumulative monthly supplements to it published by Lloyd's Register;
- The weekly list of alterations to the Register of Ships (non-cumulative) produced by Lloyd's Register;
- On-line access to the Lloyd's Register Ship Particulars File;
- Inquiry to the IMO Secretariat.

V. Revision of the Recommendation

15. This Recommendation may be revised in the light of experience to be gained with its use.
