

STATEMENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL MARITIME ORGANIZATION

AT THE

HIGH-LEVEL SIDE EVENT

“Strengthening cooperation on migration and refugee movements in the perspective of the new development agenda”

30 September 2015

Thank you Mr. Secretary-General and Excellencies. As the United Nations specialized agency with the remit for safety of life at sea; IMO closely monitors the global crisis involving the unsafe transport of mixed migrants by sea and strongly condemns the criminals involved in people smuggling - sending completely unseaworthy ships to sea without the slightest consideration for the safety of those onboard. This disregard for even the most basic of the safety regulations embodied in the IMO regulatory regime has resulted in the deaths of thousands of innocent people. As any experienced mariner knows, even in calm weather, the sea is a dangerous place, and the risk of death and injury can only be properly mitigated through adherence to IMO standards. These grossly overloaded, unfit, unsafe vessels should never take to sea at all and should be stopped before they leave port.

On the other hand, the response by those participating in search and rescue operations has been nothing short of heroic. Coast Guards, navies, merchant vessels, fishing boats and private yachts have all upheld principles of international law and the highest traditions of the sea by selflessly rescuing tens of thousands of mixed migrants. Since January 2014 in the Mediterranean alone over 1200 merchant vessels have diverted from their intended voyage to rescue over 50,000 migrants at great danger to the crews and at great expense to their owners. The shipping community has repeatedly reiterated that they will always respond to those in need of assistance at sea.

Unsafe mixed migration by sea and the international maritime search and rescue (SAR) system have been under scrutiny at IMO this year with the interagency meeting in March, discussions at the IMO's Legal and Maritime Safety Committees and Council, and at a meeting to examine the legal framework for the treatment of persons rescued at sea last week. Whereas there is little appetite among IMO Member States to alter the existing legal framework for SAR, there is a clear recognition that using it to respond to mass mixed migration was neither foreseen nor intended. While there is currently no option but to continue rescue operations, safe, legal pathways to migration must be developed, including safe, organized migration by sea, if necessary.

The dilemma of using the SAR system, i.e. placing migrants in distress in hope of rescue, was the topic of a letter from the International Chamber of Shipping, which IMO Secretary-General Sekimizu forwarded to the Secretary-General last week. IMO requests that the ICS Proposal and this intervention be given due consideration as we work together to prevent any further needless deaths at sea.

Thank you, Mr. Secretary-General.