



Sixth sitting

Tuesday, 21 February 2006, 3.15 p.m.

President: Mr. Schindler

ADDRESS BY MR. XU, VICE-MINISTER, MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATIONS, PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

Original French: The PRESIDENT

Before continuing the general debate on the reports of the Chairman of the Governing Body and the Director-General, the Conference has the privilege of welcoming Mr. Xu, Vice-Minister of Communications of the People's Republic of China, a great maritime nation which has played an extremely important role throughout the negotiating process on the draft consolidated Convention. It is therefore with great pleasure that I give the floor to Mr. Xu, Vice-Minister of Communications of the People's Republic of China.

Original Chinese: Mr. XU (Vice-Minister, Ministry of Communications, People's Republic of China)

It gives me great honour to attend the 94th (Maritime) Session of the International Labour Conference, which provides me with an excellent opportunity to exchange views with all participating delegates on the issues of social protection for seafarers.

Sea transport is now provided with historically unprecedented opportunities with the rapid growth of the world economy and international trade. As one of the safest, most cost-effective and environmentally friendly modes of bulk transport over any great distance, sea transport has contributed significantly to the economic prosperity of countries worldwide. Therefore, the international community is increasingly aware of the essential role of shipping in making the economies of countries throughout the world prosper. However, the shipping industry is also confronted with new challenges with the deepening of economic globalization. In the context of the campaign for the sustainable development of the world economy, it is imperative for us to engage in analysis and seek solutions for the development of sustainable shipping.

The topic of my speech today is "A human-oriented approach for the development of sustainable shipping", and I would like to highlight that sustainable shipping, which is fully reflected in its safety, environmental friendliness, efficiency and potential for development, cannot be achieved without the contribution and dedication of competent and adequately protected seafarers.

1. The important role of sea transport and seafarers in global economic development

The Secretary-General of the IMO once rendered vividly that: "We live in a global society which is supported by a global economy – and that economy simply could not function if it were not for ships and the shipping industry." Sea transport is playing an unprecedentedly important role in international trade, with 90 per cent of the world's total volume carried by sea. While ensuring the smooth functioning of international commercial activities, the shipping industry, as a type of service trade, also positively contributes to the total sum of the global economy in terms of freight. With the constant restructuring and the shifting of focus of the international shipping market, sea transport is playing a more and more important role in the economic development of the developing countries. Many developing countries have benefited economically by building up their national fleets and developing the shipping-related industries, such as shipbuilding, repairing, port service and seafarer supplying. Shipping and its related industries have become the main pillar for economic development in some countries and regions.

Though being proud of the great contributions made by sea transport to global economic development, we should by no means forget those behind these contributions, namely, the 1.2 million seafarers worldwide living and working in the extremely narrow and small spaces on board ships, braving the turbulent waves.

It is the dedication and contribution of these seafarers that has led to the protection of the safety of ships and lives of passengers on board, the prevention of marine pollution from ships, and to ensuring commercial activities to accelerate the process of economic globalization. I very much appreciate the following popular comment on seafarers: without the contribution of seafarers, "half the world would freeze and the other half would starve". As a seafarer who has spent more than 12 years on ships, I feel very proud to hear it.

2. Problems faced by the seafarer profession

Proud as we are, there is no reason to shy away from the problems the seafarer profession is now encountering. Seafaring used to be a very attractive profession with relatively high payment, long vacations, opportunities to travel around the globe, adventurous experience and decent social status. We

cannot however ignore, on the one hand, its hardship in nature, such as the heavy workload, homesickness and the high risk of disease and injury or, on the other, the enduring hardships imposed by a few unscrupulous shipowners, such as the infringement of rights, working and living on board without a sanitary or healthy environment, delays in or being deprived of payment, lack of medical care, and being the victims of abuse and abandonment.

Over the past few years, technological progress and the constant restructuring of the shipping industry have resulted in faster operational cycles for ships and shorter periods of port calling. Laws and regulations on maritime safety, security and environmental protection have also imposed more obligations and responsibilities on seafarers, thus greatly lessening the appeal of this profession. Besides, some shipowners, in pursuing sheer business profits, are reluctant to provide decent working and living conditions for seafarers which, in effect, has taken away their advantage over those on shore. What is more, seafarers' right to shore leave is negatively affected by the intensifying need for security by some countries, and the rising trend of seafarer criminalization triggered by several major oil spill incidents will inevitably have a further negative impact on the shipping industry, including discouraging the enthusiasm of the seafarers in service and making it more difficult to attract young people of high calibre to work on board. It is easy to foresee that these emerging problems confronting the seafarer profession will be detrimental to the future development of the shipping industry.

3. Seafarer protection and the development of sustainable shipping

Modern shipping technologies brought about safer navigation, larger carrying capacity and more effective protection of the marine environment. However, navigation on the high seas is still a high-risk profession. Despite a downward trend in incidence in recent years, maritime accidents still lead to heavy seafarer casualties, a huge amount of property loss and extensive damage to the marine environment. The loss of lives and property in maritime accidents are the core criteria for assessing the sustainability of maritime activities, while the improvement in the overall quality of seafarers holds the key to the continuous reduction in maritime accidents. It is only experienced, well-trained, competent seafarers with high morale who are able to guarantee the sustainable development of the shipping industry. In this connection, we should examine the shipping industry, in particular focusing on the issues related to seafarers, and analyse and seek solutions from the perspective of development policy for the industry and the guiding principles for economic activity.

We are delighted to note that, over the years, the International Labour Organization has made unremitting efforts with regard to the protection of the fundamental rights of seafarers and the improvement of their working and living conditions. The large number of maritime labour Conventions and Recommendations adopted by the ILO has significantly promoted the protection of the fundamental rights and interests of seafarers and exerted far-reaching influence on the development of the shipping industry. The International Programme for the Promotion of Decent Work in the Maritime Indus-

try, initiated by the ILO, has effectively increased the awareness of the countries concerned regarding the social protection of seafarers and has strengthened the implementation of maritime labour standards, as well as contributing positively to attracting and retaining people of high calibre to the maritime sector. I believe that the forthcoming adoption of the consolidated maritime labour Convention will effectively standardize the existing international laws and practices regulating the protection and management of seafarers, thus bringing about the revolutionary advancement of a sustainable shipping industry.

However, one key point should be highlighted in international maritime labour legislation. To be frank, the right to employment is one of the fundamental rights for seafarers in developing countries. The right to employment constitutes the basis for their other rights. The development of international maritime labour standards should progress step-by-step, taking into account the imbalances affecting economic development in different countries and regions worldwide. It is irrational to pursue blindly high standards, high welfare and luxurious conditions on board regardless of the development situation. The basic purpose of developing international labour standards is to ensure the right to decent work for all workers, rather than damaging the livelihoods of the majority of workers in developing countries through unequal economic development and an unjust international order left over from history. The way in which modern shipping has developed indicates that such practices can by no means support sustainable development in shipping.

4. The development of the shipping industry and seafarer protection in China

China is a large shipping country and maritime transport plays a major role in its national economic development. After decades of rapid development, there are at present over 2,600 seagoing vessels with above 1,000 gross tonnage, totalling 57 million dwt. The volume of maritime trade for China hit 1.25 billion tons in 2005. With one of the largest merchant fleets in the world, China has made significant contributions to world trade and China's shipping industry has effectively guaranteed its national economic development.

Moreover, China is one of the countries with the largest number of seafarers in the world. There are now nearly 400,000 qualified seafarers in China, 135,000 of whom are senior officers. Over the past few years, in order to ensure the quality and educational level of our seafarers, the Chinese Government has made considerable efforts to establish a fully fledged system of training, examination and certification for seafarers and has honoured its commitments as a party to the IMO's International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers, 1978, in a full and effective manner. The Chinese Government has also always attached great importance to the protection of the legitimate rights of seafarers, constantly improving the working and living conditions, payment and welfare of seafarers on the basis of its national economic development; stepping up the improvement of laws and regulations; strengthening the regulatory function of the Government and expanding the scope of the social protection enjoyed by seafarers.

Classical economic theory holds that people always focus on wealth accumulation, therefore, humans, in particular the workers, are only regarded as the productive factor for wealth accumulation. Experience has shown that the concept of development pursued solely for material wealth is wrong and can only result in the imbalanced development of society as a whole and social problems. The correct concept of development should be a “human-oriented” approach for sustainable development in an all-around way, that is to say the enhancement of the living standards of the people, full employment and the overall progress of the economy and society. The “human-oriented” approach is a basis and precondition for the development of a sustainable shipping industry.

The Chinese Government is now pursuing a “human-oriented” approach for sustainable development in a harmonized and all-around way, within which the concept of “human-oriented” is particularly highlighted by the manner in which its national administration cares for people’s interest and governs the people. This approach is reflected in China’s various policies, rules and regulations. In a broad sense, economic development is considered an approach rather than the ultimate goal. It is our ultimate goal to achieve the common prosperity of the people and the highest level of welfare for society as a whole, rather than simply pursuing as much wealth as possible. When applied to the shipping industry, the concept of “human-oriented” is taken to mean that the Government has the responsibility to protect the rights of shipowners on the one hand, and the employment rights and other fundamental rights of seafarers on the other hand, to achieve maximum profits and fairness. The major role and status of seafarers in the maritime sector should be fully recognized thus preventing the infringement of the rights of seafarers by some shipping companies in pursuit of profits.

5. Measures to be taken by China to protect seafarers

At the present time, China faces many challenges in the process of economic and social development, as demonstrated by less developed productivity and an uneven development between the urban and rural areas. With regard to the social protection of workers, the Chinese Government is now committing itself to promoting the harmonious development of society, creating job opportunities through all channels and accelerating the improvement of the social security system and regulating rational distribution of social wealth. These strategies for national development provide clear guidance on the direction for the social protection of seafarers.

First, focusing on economic development and accelerating further development of the shipping industry, so as to give the impetus to national economic development and increase job opportunities at sea.

Secondly, protecting the fundamental rights of seafarers by developing and improving the regulatory regime for the social protection of seafarers, in particular, to establish an effective maritime labour inspection system. Special efforts will be made to prevent unlawful acts against the legitimate rights of seafarers and to provide them with real benefits on the basis of ensuring efficiency and fairness.

Thirdly, further strengthening occupational guidance and planning, to improve the educational and training level of our seafarers with the aim of establishing a high-quality, competitive maritime workforce.

Fourthly, actively participating in initiatives based on international cooperation and relating to social protection of seafarers and drawing upon the experiences of other countries.

In order to protect the fundamental rights of seafarers, a sustainable shipping industry, based on the rule of law and on the concept of a level playing field, must be established. We also need to satisfy present development needs, while preserving the potential for future development. High-calibre, quality seafarers are the key to the future development of the shipping industry. Only by fully respecting, protecting, understanding, taking care of and relying on them, can we achieve the sustainable development of the shipping industry.

Original French: The PRESIDENT

On behalf of the Conference I would like to thank you Mr. Vice-Minister. Yesterday we had the privilege of listening to the statement from the Deputy Minister of Trade and Industry of Norway, who emphasized the need to provide secure and decent jobs in the maritime sector. Your statement goes along the same lines and it is of particular significance coming from a country where the maritime sector, which is already important, is undergoing rapid growth. The Government of the Republic of China has given unfailing support to our work and I would like to express my gratitude for the role which China has played in the elaboration of this Convention, which aims at protecting seafarers of the whole world, particularly with the contribution of Mr. Zhang who has chaired the Government group.

REPORTS OF THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE GOVERNING BODY AND OF THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL: DISCUSSION (CONT.)

Original French: The PRESIDENT

We will now resume the general debate on reports of the Chairperson of the Governing Body and the Director-General.

(The sitting continues with delegates’ statements.)

(The Conference adjourned at 5.05 p.m.)

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