

IMO rejects Brussels' claims

By Justin Stares in Brussels - Monday 12 March 2007



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EUROPEAN commission claims that the International Maritime Organization does not recognise the European Union are untrue, according to the IMO's director of legal affairs.

In a letter to Lloyd's List, Rosalie Balkin, head of the IMO's legal affairs and external relations, said a statement made last week by commission maritime director Fotis Karamitsos about the EU's status within the maritime world's leading forum was "factually incorrect".

At a Brussels seminar, Mr Karamitsos repeated the commission's call for EU membership of IMO on the grounds that "the IMO doesn't recognise the existence of the EU." Due to this lack of recognition the commission could not even present documents to the IMO, he said. The EU should have "observer status," he said.

The IMO director rejected both claims. "The commission has had observer status at IMO since 1974 and, through that status, it is, therefore, factually incorrect to suggest that the Organization does not recognise the existence of the EU," she wrote. "The commission, like all other entities enjoying observer status at IMO, is entitled to submit documents to all IMO bodies and has done so on many occasions. Such documents are, accordingly, circulated among IMO members and observers."

She also rejected suggestions that it was nonsensical of the IMO to recognise other regional bodies while not recognising the EU. "The EU has, to date, not sought observer status in its own right, as have other regional intergovernmental entities (the African Union and the Organization of American States)," it was pointed out. If one day the EU does seek such status, it would be up to other IMO members to consider the request "in accordance with the applicable provisions."

Criticism by EU transport commissioner Jacques Barrot that member states were using the IMO as a "brake" was equally rebutted. "Let us stop using IMO as a 'brake unit' and, let us pull our weight together," Mr Barrot told the seminar organised by the European Community Shipowners' Association.

"I would also underline IMO's excellent record in shaping the global regulatory framework with due speed, as witnessed by the introduction of significant maritime safety, security and marine environment protection measures — such as SOLAS chapter XI-2 and the ISPS Code, or those following the Estonia, Erika, Prestige and Star Princess incidents — all of which were adopted under the maximum speed," Ms Balkin wrote.

The commission claims it should speak for Europe on subjects of exclusive Community competence, but member states with substantial maritime industries have resisted such calls on the grounds that IMO is a technical body and risks becoming politicised by a bloc vote.

Commissioners have in the past suggested they would be satisfied with gradual steps towards full membership. Similar pushes are being made in other international bodies.

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