

IMO tracking scheme delayed by data centres

By Craig Eason - Tuesday 18 November 2008

FEARS are increasing that many data centres will not be ready for the launch of the International Maritime Organization's long-range and identification tracking programme (LRIT).

Without the data centres to send their vessels' positions to, shipowners risk inadvertently being in contravention of the Safety of Life at Sea convention when LRIT becomes a requirement at the end of the year.

The IMO has pushed through the implementation of LRIT in its maritime safety committee.

Over the past two years, there has been a huge amount of work in soothing political fears of having ships' positions made available between administrations, as well as in developing the technical solutions.

The costing arrangements for collection of data transmitted from oceangoing vessels at sea was resolved at the last maritime safety committee meeting earlier this year.

But at the meeting shipowner groups raised concerns that there would not be sufficient data centres ready before the December 31 deadline.

The International Mobile Satellite Organisation (IMSO), which was created to launch and run services related to the IMO's global maritime distress and safety system, has taken a lead role in the development of the LRIT system.

In September, its delegates approved a change of its charter, agreeing to become the official LRIT co-ordinator.

Under the complex arrangements, IMSO will audit the various national and regional data centres that will be created to receive data from ships under respective flags.

With only a few weeks to go before the official launch date, Chile has signed the first agreement with IMSO for this oversight and co-ordination function.

But the organisation admits it will not have signed contracts with all data centres by the end of the year, despite pushing forward a model LRIT service agreement to make the process easier.

"This is the first data centre that has agreed to comply and that is significant," said IMSO director-general Esteban Pacha-Vicente. "We have drafts with other governments, which [we] will hopefully sign at the next MSC in December."

But he said the European Union, which would be signing for 29 states, and the US had only begun to draft agreements.

Despite IMSO's and IMO's best efforts, concerns remain over the inability of countries to receive transmitted data.

Slovenia, which held the EU presidency at the time of the last MSC meeting in May, described setting up an EU data centre, as a "large and complex undertaking" to cover the 27 EU members plus Iceland and Norway.

“Due to the complexity of the project, the European LRIT data centre might not be operational on time. This might also be the case for some other IMO member states.” The proposal suggested at the time was for “leniency on the enforcement of the control provisions during the first year of implementation”.

IMSO said there will be about 40 regional or national data centres established eventually.

Capt Pacha-Vicente insisted that after the first agreement with a data centre accepting IMSO as the LRIT coordinator, others would follow.

“The system will still be implemented at the end of the year, but some agreements will be signed in 2009,” he said, although audits would not be made until after the first year.

The forthcoming IMO Maritime Safety Committee meeting in December will push for states to agree to IMSO acting as auditor, and to finalise the technical arrangements for the reporting structure.

It will also have to deal with the potentially thorny issue of the final location of the international data exchange (IDE), which allows states to share information.

The US is building the IDE, but has only agreed to run it on a temporary basis until a permanent solution is found.

Moreover, the MSC must address the development of an international data centre (IDC), to be used by vessels flagged in countries that are not developing their own data centre.

The IMO has avoided the IDC issue by not allocating one, hoping that member states will form regional or national data centres where their registered ships can report.

However, some of the larger flags, such as Panama, have said they prefer the IDC option rather than their own national one.

The lack of an IDC could again see vessels in contravention of the Solas convention if there is nowhere to which they can report.

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