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DR MARTIN STOPFORD**

IACS an 'unsung hero', says chairman Sharma

The International Association of Classification Societies has had a lot on its plate this year, as outgoing chairman **Arun Sharma** of Indian Register of Shipping tells **Shirish Nadkarni**.



Arun Sharma, executive chairman of Indian Register of Shipping (IRS), faced a particularly challenging year as chairman of IACS (the International Association of Classification Societies), even before the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic came along. But his time in charge, which ends in early July, has left him more convinced than ever that IACS is an 'unsung hero in the shipping firmament' as it is 'virtually the technical arm of the IMO,' global regulator for maritime matters.

Top of the agenda when Sharma assumed IACS chairmanship were desulphurisation of shipping emissions in time for the International Maritime Organization's January 1, 2020 deadline, and then preparations for progressive decarbonisation in line with IMO 2030 and 2050 goals. But Sharma's own particular priority was encouraging shipping's greater adoption of data use.

'One of the main projects that I wanted to complete during my tenure was getting into a data-driven policy,' he tells Seatrade in an exclusive interview. 'In my opinion, a lot of shipping-related companies are far from digitisation. I wanted it done for IACS. A core group has been set up to work out what data is important for IACS, and what will be the output from this data. We need to

collect this data, whether it be technical, plan, casualty or component failures.

'A lot of this data can bring to the fore privacy issues, such as where is my company in terms of approvals, what sort of accidents we have had, what caused them, and how the failures took place,' he continues. 'Some of this data a shipowner would not mind sharing in a very broad manner, without divulging identities, but some of it he may not want to share, on account of its being too private and personal. So the group will tackle the issues of privacy and intellectual rights, and look at what outputs are needed, what kind of data needs to be collected.'

Cyber security is another area where IACS has been active the past year, again with the view to creating 'a unified requirement across all classification societies.'

But all these developments have now been overshadowed by the clear and present danger of COVID-19 to the shipping industry and its workforce.

IACS has been liaising closely with other shipping bodies during the pandemic, Sharma reports, and 'setting up an interactive website on the IACS platform, where a number of owners are asking about relevant issues like the possible expiry of a certificate when they have not been

able to carry out the mandatory surveys because of the travel restrictions. We have hyperlinks on the website where the other stakeholders become accessible to the owner to answer questions pertinent to them, and make constructive suggestions during this difficult period, which could last several months.'

As regards the problem of class surveyors accessing ships in the current situation of widespread lockdowns and travel restriction, Sharma relates that 'we have been advising our surveyors to take the history of the ship – which countries it has traversed through in the past few weeks, and the state of health of the ship's personnel. If they feel it is safe to board the ship, they are free to go ahead and conduct the survey.'

'If they feel it is not safe for them to actually go on board,' he continues, 'they have been instructed to ask the Chief Engineer to examine the machinery concerned and give an honest report. If the class society can directly issue them an extension of the certificate, that can be done. Wherever you need the coming in of an authority like the Director-General of Shipping (DGS) in India, you provide the status, and give your recommendations – that the certificate should be extended.'

'The idea is to provide as much help as possible to the shipowner without compromising on the health issues of all concerned. At the same time, we must provide an environment where safe shipping should continue to carry cargo at optimal efficiency.'

Sharma ends by extending his sympathy to seafarers who find themselves locked down on ships without the possibility of crew changes. 'This need not be an issue, because I can tell you that I personally have stayed on a ship for 21 months at a time,' he adds, quipping: 'if you are safe on a ship, at least you get your meals on time!' ●