



# Technical Circular

No.: 019/2026

Date: 09<sup>th</sup> October 2026

**Subject: IMO Revised Guidelines on Safety during Abandon Ship Drills using Lifeboats.**

1. The Maritime Safety Committee (MSC), at its 111th session held from 13 to 22 May 2026, approved the Revised Guidelines on Safety During Abandon Ship Drills Using Lifeboats vide MSC.1/Circ.1578/Rev.1, which supersedes MSC.1/Circ.1578.
2. The amendments follow changes to the International Life-Saving Appliance (LSA) Code adopted through resolution MSC.589(111), particularly regarding **arrangements for testing free-fall lifeboat release systems under load without launching the lifeboat into the water.**
3. The guidelines build on a series of measures developed by the MSC over the past two decades to reduce the risk of accidents during lifeboat drills and improve the safe conduct of abandon ship exercises.
4. The revised Guidelines emphasize that:
  - a. Drills should be carefully planned, risk assessed and conducted under the supervision of competent personnel;
  - b. The manufacturer's operating and maintenance instructions should always be followed;
  - c. Procedures for safe drills should form part of the ship's SMS;
  - d. When drills are to be performed with persons on board the lifeboat, it is recommended that the boat be lowered and recovered without any persons on board first to ascertain that the arrangement functions correctly. In this case, the boat should then be lowered into the water with only the number of persons on board necessary to operate the boat;
  - e. Simulated launching of free-fall lifeboats should only be carried out where the lifeboat and launching appliance are specifically designed for simulated launching and the manufacturer has provided approved procedures;
  - f. **For simulated launching of free-fall lifeboats, ensure that the arrangement to test the release system under load without launching the lifeboat into the water provided by the manufacturer is installed and secure and that the free-fall release mechanism is fully and correctly engaged; and**
  - g. The objective of drills is to develop crew competence and confidence while minimizing the risk of injury during training.



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. While we have taken utmost care to be as factual as possible, readers/ users are advised to verify the exact text and content of the Regulation from the original source/ issuing Authority.

5. Ship Owners/ operators and Masters are advised to use these Guidelines when planning and conducting abandon ship drills involving lifeboats.

**Enclosure:** IMO Circular – MSC.1/Circ. 1578/Rev.1

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## **REVISED GUIDELINES ON SAFETY DURING ABANDON SHIP DRILLS USING LIFEBOATS**

1 The Maritime Safety Committee, at its eighty-first session (10 to 19 May 2006), recalled that, at its seventy-ninth session (1 to 10 December 2004), it had endorsed the intention of the Sub-Committee on Ship Design and Equipment, in cooperation with the Sub-Committee on Standards of Training and Watchkeeping, to develop further guidance as envisioned in the *Accidents with lifeboats* (MSC/Circ.1049) and, accordingly, approved the *Guidance on safety during abandon ship drills using lifeboats* (MSC/Circ.1136).

2 The Committee also recalled that the guidance developed for lifeboats has relevance, in general, for emergency drills related to other life-saving systems and should be taken into account when such drills are conducted. In connection with MSC/Circ.1136, and recognizing the need to provide a basic outline of essential steps to safely carry out simulated launching of free-fall lifeboats in accordance with SOLAS regulation III/19.3.4.4, and having considered the proposals made by the Sub-Committee on Ship Design and Equipment, at its forty-seventh session, the Committee also approved the *Guidelines for simulated launching of free-fall lifeboats* (MSC/Circ.1137).

3 Having considered the need to update the above Guidance and Guidelines, and having considered the proposals made by the Sub-Committee on Fire Protection, at its fiftieth session, to consolidate the numerous circulars on the subject of measures to prevent accidents with lifeboats in order to better serve the mariner, the Committee, at its eighty-first session, approved the *Guidelines on safety during abandon ship drills using lifeboats*, as set out in annex 2 to the *Measures to prevent accidents with lifeboats* (MSC.1/Circ.1206/Rev.1).

4 The Committee, at its ninety-eighth session (7 to 16 June 2017), approved the *Guidelines on safety during abandon ship drills using lifeboats*, following the amalgamation of annex 1 to the *Measures to prevent accidents with lifeboats* (MSC.1/Circ.1206/Rev.1) and the *Interim Recommendation on conditions for authorization of service providers for lifeboats, launching appliances and on-load release gear* (MSC.1/Circ.1277) in the *Requirements for maintenance, thorough examination, operational testing, overhaul and repair of lifeboats and rescue boats, launching appliances and release gear* (resolution MSC.402(96)), which revoked annex 1 to MSC.1/Circ.1206/Rev.1.

5 The Committee, at its 111th session (13 to 22 May 2026), approved consequential amendments emanating from the amendments to the LSA Code adopted by resolution MSC.589(111) with respect to the arrangements to test the release system under load without launching the free-fall lifeboat into the water. The text of the *Revised guidelines on safety during abandon ship drills using lifeboats* is set out in the annex.

6 Member States are invited to give effect to the annexed Revised Guidelines and to bring them to the attention of shipowners, ship operators, ship-vetting organizations, ship personnel, surveyors, manufacturers and all other parties concerned.

7 This circular supersedes MSC.1/Circ.1578.

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## **ANNEX**

### **REVISED GUIDELINES ON SAFETY DURING ABANDON SHIP DRILLS USING LIFEBOATS**

#### **1 GENERAL**

##### **1.1 Introduction**

1.1.1 It is essential that seafarers are familiar with the life-saving appliances on board their ships and that they have confidence that the appliances provided for their safety will work and will be effective in an emergency. Frequent periodic shipboard drills are necessary to achieve this.

1.1.2 Crew training is an important component of drills. As a supplement to initial shore-based training, onboard drills and training will familiarize crew members with the ships' appliances and the associated procedures. The objective of drill and training is to develop appropriate crew competencies, enabling effective and safe utilization of the equipment required by the 1974 SOLAS Convention, as amended (SOLAS). The time limits set out in SOLAS for ship abandonment should be considered as a secondary objective when conducting drills.

##### **1.2 Drill frequency**

Experience has shown that holding frequent drills makes the crew more familiar with the life-saving appliances on board their ships and increases their confidence that the appliances will work and will be effective in an emergency. Drills give the opportunity to gain experience in the use of the safety equipment in cooperation. The ability to cope with an emergency and handle the situation is improved by frequent drills. However, frequent crew changes sometimes make it difficult to ensure that all on board have the opportunity to participate in drills when the minimum required drills are conducted only. Therefore, consideration needs to be given to scheduling drills as necessary to ensure all on board have an early opportunity to become familiar with the ship appliances and systems.

##### **1.3 Drills must be safe**

1.3.1 Abandon ship drills should be planned, organized and performed in accordance with relevant shipboard requirements of occupational safety and health so that the recognized risks are minimized.

1.3.2 Drills provide an opportunity to verify that the life-saving appliances are working and that all associated equipment is in place, in good working order and ready for use.

1.3.3 Before conducting drills, it should be checked that the lifeboat and its equipment have been maintained in accordance with the ship's maintenance manuals and any associated technical documentation, as well as noting all the precautionary measures necessary. Abnormal conditions of wear and tear or corrosion should be reported to the responsible officer immediately.

##### **1.4 Emphasis on learning**

Drills should be conducted with an emphasis on learning and be viewed as a learning experience, not just as a task to meet a regulatory requirement to conduct drills. Whether they are emergency drills required by SOLAS or additional special drills conducted to enhance

the competence of the crew members, they should be carried out at safe speed. During drills, care should be taken to ensure that persons on board familiarize themselves with their duties and with the equipment. If necessary, pauses should be made during the drills to explain especially difficult elements. The experience of the crew is an important factor in determining how fast a drill or certain drill elements should be carried out.

## **1.5 Planning and organizing drills**

1.5.1 SOLAS requires that drills shall, as far as practicable, be conducted as if there was an actual emergency.<sup>1</sup> This means that the entire drill should, as far as possible, be carried out, while ensuring that the drill can be performed in such a way that it is safe in every respect. Consequently, elements of the drill that may involve unnecessary risks need special attention or may be excluded from the drill.

1.5.2 In preparing for a drill, those responsible should review the manufacturer's instruction manual to ensure that a planned drill is conducted properly. Those responsible for the drill should ensure that the crew is familiar with the guidance provided in the life-saving appliances instruction manuals.

1.5.3 Lessons learned in the course of a drill should be documented and made a part of the follow-up shipboard training discussions and the planning of the next drill session.

1.5.4 The lowering of a boat with its full complement of persons is an example of an element of a drill that may, depending on the circumstances, involve an unnecessary risk. Such drills should only be carried out if special precautions are observed.

## **2 ABANDON SHIP DRILLS**

### **2.1 Introduction**

It is important that the crew who operate safety equipment on board are familiar with the functioning and operation of such equipment. SOLAS requires that sufficiently detailed manufacturers' training manuals and instructions be carried on board, which should be easily understood by the crew. Such manufacturers' manuals and instructions should be accessible for everyone on board and observed and followed closely when preparing and conducting drills.

### **2.2 Guidance to the shipowner**

2.2.1 The shipowner should ensure that new safety equipment on board the company's ships has been approved and installed in accordance with the provisions of SOLAS and the International Life-Saving Appliances (LSA) Code.

2.2.2 Procedures for holding safe drills should be included in the Safety Management System (SMS) of the shipping companies. Detailed procedures for elements of drills that involve a special risk should be evident from workplace assessments adjusted to the relevant life-saving appliance.

2.2.3 Personnel carrying out maintenance and repair work on lifeboats should be qualified accordingly.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to SOLAS regulation III/19.3.1.

<sup>2</sup> Refer to the *Requirements for maintenance, thorough examination, operational testing, overhaul and repair of lifeboats and rescue boats, launching appliances and release gear*, adopted by resolution MSC.402(96).

## **2.3 Lifeboats lowered by means of falls**

2.3.1 During drills, everyone participating should be alert for potentially dangerous conditions or situations and should bring them to the attention of the responsible person for appropriate action. Feedback and recommendations to the shipowner, the Administration and the system manufacturer are important elements of the marine safety system.

2.3.2 When drills are to be performed with persons on board the lifeboat, it is recommended that the boat be lowered and recovered without any persons on board first to ascertain that the arrangement functions correctly. In this case, the boat should then be lowered into the water with only the number of persons on board necessary to operate the boat.<sup>3</sup>

2.3.3 To prevent lashings or gripes from getting entangled, proper release should be checked before swinging out the davit.

## **2.4 Free-fall lifeboats**

2.4.1 The monthly drills with free-fall lifeboats should be carried out according to the manufacturer's instructions, so that the persons who are to enter the boat in an emergency are trained to embark the boat, take their seats in a correct way and use the safety belts; as well as being instructed on how to act during launching into the sea.

2.4.2 When the lifeboat is free-fall launched as part of a drill, this should be carried out with the minimum personnel required to manoeuvre the boat in the water and to recover it. The recovery operation should be carried out with special attention, bearing in mind the high-risk level of this operation. Where permitted by SOLAS<sup>4</sup>, simulated launching should be carried out in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions, taking due note of the Guidelines for simulated launching of free-fall lifeboats, as set out in the appendix.

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<sup>3</sup> Refer to the *Clarification of SOLAS regulation III/19* (MSC.1/Circ.1326 and Corr.1).

<sup>4</sup> Refer to SOLAS regulation III/19.3.4.4.

## **APPENDIX**

### **REVISED GUIDELINES FOR SIMULATED LAUNCHING OF FREE-FALL LIFEBOATS DURING DRILLS**

#### **1 Definition**

Simulated launching carried out during drills, in accordance with SOLAS regulation III/19, is a means of training the crew in the free-fall release procedure of free-fall lifeboats without the physical activation of the release mechanism.

#### **2 Purpose and scope**

The purpose of these Guidelines is to provide a basic outline of essential steps to safely carry out simulated launching. These Guidelines are general; the lifeboat manufacturer's instruction manual should always be consulted before conducting simulated launching. Simulated launching should only be carried out with lifeboats and launching appliances designed to accommodate it, and for which the manufacturer has provided instructions. All persons involved should be familiar with the manufacturers' instructions and the activation of the release mechanism. Manuals, posters and signs may be used to assist familiarization and the conduct of drills. Simulated launching should be carried out under the supervision of a responsible person who should be an officer experienced in such procedures and be conducted without the physical activation of the free-fall release system. Testing of release systems should be separate to and not carried out during simulated launching drills.

#### **3 Conduct of drills – typical simulated launching sequence (SOLAS regulation III/19)**

3.1 Check equipment and documentation to ensure that all components of the lifeboat and launching appliance are in good operational condition.

3.2 Ensure that all personnel involved in the drill are familiar with the operating manuals, posters and signs.

3.3 Ensure that the restraining device(s) provided by the manufacturer for simulated launching are installed and secure and that the free-fall release mechanism is fully and correctly engaged.

3.3 Ensure that the arrangement to test the release system under load without launching the lifeboat into the water provided by the manufacturer is installed and secure and that the free-fall release mechanism is fully and correctly engaged.

3.4 Establish and maintain good communication between the assigned operating crew and the responsible person.

3.5 Disengage lashings, gripes, etc. installed to secure the lifeboat for sea or for maintenance, except those required for simulated free-fall.

3.6 Participating crew board the lifeboat and fasten their seatbelts under the supervision of the responsible person.

3.7 All crew disembark the lifeboat.

3.8 Return the lifeboat to the condition it was in prior to step provided in paragraph 3.4. Ensure that the lifeboat is returned to its normal stowed condition. Remove any restraining devices, the arrangement to test the release system, and/or recovery devices used only for the simulated launch procedure.

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