

World Maritime Day 2023: Commemorating 50 Years of MARPOL

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Today, on 28 September 2023, the 45th World Maritime Day is being celebrated around the world.¹ First celebrated on 17 March 1978 to mark the 20th anniversary of the International Maritime Convention's entry into force, this day is celebrated by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and its 175 member nations.² While the first two celebrations were held on 17 March, it has been held on the last Thursday of September every year since then. Among other planned celebrations this year, the IMO headquarters in London and its striking Seafarer's memorial will be lit up in blue,³ and the IMO-UNEP-Norway Innovation Forum will be held online and in person in London.⁴

The IMO is a specialized agency of the United Nations whose mission is to “*to promote safe, secure, environmentally sound, efficient and sustainable shipping through cooperation.*” Meeting since 1959, the IMO is a critical forum for countries to discuss and agree upon various norms and treaties regulating international shipping.⁵ Key IMO treaties include the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships, 1973 (MARPOL); the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, 1974 (SOLAS); the Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea, 1974, (COLREGS); the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watch-keeping for Seafarers, 1978; the Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of Maritime Navigation, 1988; the International Convention on the Control of Harmful Anti-fouling Systems on Ships, 2001; the International Convention for the Control and Management of Ships' Ballast Water and Sediments, 2004; and the Hong Kong International Convention for the Safe and Environmentally Sound Recycling of Ships, 2009.⁶

¹ International Maritime Organization, “World Maritime Theme 2023”, <https://www.imo.org/en/About/Events/Pages/World-Maritime-theme-2023.aspx>.

² International Maritime Organization, “Member States”, <https://www.imo.org/en/OurWork/ERO/Pages/MemberStates.aspx>.

³ *Ibid.*1, International Maritime Organization, “World Maritime Theme 2023”.

⁴ International Maritime Organization, “IMO-UNEP-Norway Innovative Forum 2023”, <https://www.imo.org/en/About/Events/Pages/Innovation-Forum-2023.aspx>.

⁵ International Maritime Organization, “Introduction to IMO”, <https://www.imo.org/en/About/Pages/Default.aspx>.

⁶ International Maritime Organization, “List of IMO Conventions”, <https://www.imo.org/en/about/Conventions/Pages/ListOfConventions.aspx>.

Given that over 80% of global trade is carried on ships, IMO's relevance to our world cannot be overstated. India has been a member country of the IMO since 1959, and has been a key player in ensuring that the rules and structures of maritime governance are equitable and practicable for all countries.⁷

The theme for World Maritime Day this year is "MARPOL at 50 – Our commitment goes on". MARPOL is the most significant treaty regulating pollution from ships; and it is a key pillar of IMO's efforts to promote green shipping. The treaty was drafted in the wake of a devastating oil spill, for instance, the Torrey Canyon disaster of 1967 – where 120,000 tonnes of oil was spilled, and in response to the growth in the transportation of oil by sea. MARPOL also addressed the pollution impacts from routine operational activities like cleaning oil tanks and waste disposal which, purely in tonnage terms, pose a greater risk to the marine environment than the accidental spills. While the original Convention was adopted in 1973, the treaty entered into force only on 02 October 1983. The Convention addresses operational and accidental causes of pollution from ships, and includes 6 technical annexes:

1. Annex I: Regulations for the prevention of pollution by oil.
2. Annex II: Regulations for the control of pollution by noxious liquid substances in bulk.
3. Annex III: Prevention of pollution by harmful substances carried by sea in packaged form.
4. Annex IV: Prevention of pollution by sewage from ships.
5. Annex V: Prevention of pollution by garbage from ships.
6. Annex VI: Prevention of air pollution from ships.⁸

Together with its Annexes, MARPOL represents a critical effort by the international community to prevent and control pollution from ships. Recognizing the seriousness of the impact of such pollution, India has taken some important steps in this regard. India has ratified MARPOL and its six annexes; and Chapter XI A of the Indian Merchant Shipping Act, 1958 (MSA) incorporates key aspects of this Convention. The MSA and its Rules cover the inspection of ships to ensure compliance as well as setting pollution standards for ships entering the Indian waters. The Directorate General of Shipping (DGS) is the custodian of MSA; and has set up an online portal called *Swachh Sagar* to manage waste reception facilities.

Marine pollution represents a major threat to the health and vitality of our aqueous environments, and to coastal communities around the world. It is to the credit of global efforts that pollution incidents are far fewer than in the past. However, as recent accidents like the *MV X-Press Pearl* and the *MV Wakashino* have shown, complacency about improvements in this space is not an

⁷ United Nations, "World Maritime Day 28 September", <https://www.un.org/en/observances/maritime-day>.

⁸ International Maritime Organization, "International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL)", [https://www.imo.org/en/about/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-for-the-Prevention-of-Pollution-from-Ships-\(MARPOL\).aspx#:~:text=The%20International%20Convention%20for%20the,2%20November%201973%20at%20IMO.](https://www.imo.org/en/about/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-for-the-Prevention-of-Pollution-from-Ships-(MARPOL).aspx#:~:text=The%20International%20Convention%20for%20the,2%20November%201973%20at%20IMO.)

option. Thus, the need of the hour is to not only uphold existing regulations and standards' but also to ensure that they are constantly improved upon and updated.

Therefore, on this World Maritime Day, let all the mariners, as well as those associated with the maritime domain take a solemn pledge to refrain from contributing to all kinds of pollution in or at sea.

About the Author

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