Being prepared for the unexpected

Safety first - Article series on the safety issues in shipping:

Being prepared for the unexpected

When travelling on board ships, few passengers think what has happened and happens behind the scenes to ensure a pleasant and safe voyage. However, the fact is that ships must meet many international safety standards before they can start operating. Moreover, all crew members have been trained to act in the unlikely event of a real emergency and the entire crew must have skills in survival techniques and in operating fire-fighting and other rescue equipment.

STEP 1:

Safe structure

A ship and its crew build up a self-sufficient unit, which must be capable of responding in case of accident without immediate external assistance. Ships are built to maintain their stability even if they sustain some damage without endangering human lives or causing damage to property and environment.

Automatic alarm and fire-fighting systems give the crew some extra time to take action. There is life-saving equipment to manage even in the worst case scenario where the ship must be evacuated and abandoned on a rescue craft.

STEP 2:

Drills and hands-on training
All crew members have been assigned duties in the shipboard emergency organization. A muster list describes who are involved in different tasks, such as fire fighting, passenger evacuation and first aid. Furthermore, the list details how rescue stations and rescue craft are manned.

Rescue and fire drills are held according to a three-month schedule and drills are mandatory for all crew members. On passenger ships, the minimum requirement is to hold one “abandon ship” drill and one fire drill every week.

To enhance the crew’s skills, drills simulate real incidents and contain many elements, like dressing the proper outfit, checking the equipment, testing alarm systems and communicating with the management group on the bridge. Lifeboats are lowered to the water and manoeuvred.

STEP 3:

Check and double-check

Maritime authorities inspect and audit the ships, their equipment and crew at regular intervals. When the crew demonstrates competence in their emergency duties and the equipment and appliances are established to be in good operable condition, safety certificates are issued. If deficiencies are detected, the crew must take prompt corrective action before permission to depart the harbour is given. The rule is to never compromise in safety issues.

Last but not least, even passengers can do their share. Everybody should read the safety instructions available and listen to the safety announcements. This way there will be no doubt what to do if alarm signals are sounded. When the voyage starts, passengers can feel safe and happily head for the restaurant, bar, sauna or sundeck without worries.