

INAUGURAL ADDRESS BY DGICG FOR 13TH NOSDCP MEETING

Senior Officers of the Indian Coast Guard, Officers representing various Ministries and Departments of the Govt of India and State governments, Senior Executives of Public and Private corporations, Distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

1. It gives me immense pleasure to be amidst you all for the first time at this periodic professional conclave dealing with our marine environment. I am indeed delighted and privileged to chair this important meeting. The purpose and objective of our getting together regularly is to review our preparedness and response capabilities, with a view to continually prepare ourselves to respond to any environmental contingency which may arise out at sea. This meeting also affords us an opportunity to monitor the progress made by various resource agencies whilst shouldering their responsibilities as per the provisions of NOSDCP.

2. As you all are aware, there is growing concern worldwide about global environmental degradation, and there now exists a genuine awareness and concern that if we do not change our ways, or if states or governments or agencies do not take the right decisions at the right time, the damage that will be caused to our coastal ecosystems and sensitive shorelines will render them incapable of sustaining living and non-living resources.

3. The quality of our environment is being closely monitored by not only national and international regulatory authorities but also by the media and public at large and ofcourse by various NGO's. In some cases, even the judiciary is stepping in to take proactive measures and giving directions to departments and agencies responsible for maintaining and protecting the environment. The involvement of the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India, along with the World Wildlife Fund and Greenpeace activists against the ship breaking industry at Alang is a case in point.

4. I need not emphasise to this gathering that preparedness is our basic objective. The recent bunker oil spill of just 40 metric tonnes by MV Pacific Adventurer off the Australian coast on 13 Mar 09 caused havoc to about 80 kilo metres of pristine beaches. The Govt of Australia was forced to declare the whole area as a disaster zone. Please note that even a small oil spill in a critical area will result in severe consequences. I reiterate that prevention and preparatory measures are therefore the key to effective pollution response. Despite much progress, we still have a long way to go and it is our job to plug the leaks, so to speak.

5. Recent trends of oil spills which have occurred worldwide indicate that – firstly, spill sizes have been reducing and secondly the predominant causative factor of environmental degradation is bunker oil spills. This has been borne out by the Indian Coast Guard's experience over the last several years. The IMO Bunker Convention has been brought into force in Nov 2008, and it would only be a matter of time before India ratifies the same. All present are requested to focus on this area in their spheres of responsibility.

6. For it's part, despite other pressing requirements, the ICG places great emphasis on our responsibility as the co-ordinator for oil spill response. The capability of the Indian Coast Guard will receive a boost later this year when the

first Pollution Control Vessel is commissioned. The state of the art vessel fitted with a dynamic positioning system, side sweeping booms and an onboard laboratory will be an important addition, in mounting pollution response operations in vital areas.

7. The first ever national level exercise off Mumbai in, which many resource agencies participated actively, is another initiative co-ordinated by the Indian Coast Guard to review our preparedness and identify the weak links. I thank all the resource agencies who participated; however many more lessons could have been learnt, and the preparation and integration level could have been further ascertained, had more resource agencies have participated in this national level exercise. I trust the response will be even better on the very next occasion.

8. As must be evident to all, the Indian Coast Guard is currently besieged with many additional responsibilities and, the security of our coast takes paramount importance. It will be most difficult for the Coast Guard at this juncture to shoulder additional responsibilities which are being requested of it by various ministries / agencies with regard to marine environment protection. All the stake holders will therefore have to share the burden as envisaged by the NOSDCP. A critical review of stakeholders and industry responsibility for oil pollution is being undertaken by the ICG. Prima facie, in view of inadequate pollution response assets available in many ports, coastal states and the oil industry need to conclude arrangements with Oil Spill Removal Organisations (OSRO) to provide the necessary response assurance.

9. It can be seen from the minutes of previous meetings that certain points which are mainly addressed to the ports, oil industry and the coastal states in response oil pollution contingency plans, undertaking risk assessment for sensitive areas, creating environment sensitive index mapping and establishing Tier-I pollution response facilities remain unresolved and incomplete. I trust these will gain momentum in the near future.

10. Harnessing information technology to our advantage to predict threats and take necessary preventive actions can provide important decision support to oil spill management teams in time of crisis. The consultants and technology are now available in India and I request the concerned stakeholders to take advantage of the same.

11. I am told that some of the presentations today have been arranged to throw light on such issues. To conclude, I do believe that frank discussions and candid sharing of views can bring us to logical conclusions that can be instituted in a time bound manner and that our collective wisdom and sincere efforts will surely strengthen the oil spill response in India. I request all participants to utilise this forum to look into shortcomings and weak areas and avail necessary assistance for taking corrective actions.

12. Finally, I would like to thank all of you for attending this important meeting, which is committed to the task of maintaining cleaner seas around the Maritime Zones of India.

Jai Hind.