Safety at sea

Choppy seas, unsafe work

Even as technology makes rapid strides, the problem of safety at sea remains far from resolved

The fishing industry capture sector has probably the worst industrial safety record of any major industry.
—David Thomson

An analysis of serious casualty statistics published by the International Maritime Organization based on data from Lloyds Maritime Information Services seems to support this view. Between 1982 and 1991, as many as 1,186 persons and 756 fishing vessels (of 100 grt and above) were reported lost or missing.

It is also significant that the number of persons lost or missing at sea was much higher in the case of fishing vessels than in the case of oil tankers. An analysis of the geographical distribution of fishing vessel casualties in the same 10-year period reveals that the most accident- prone areas were off the coasts of Britain, Japan, Korea and East Africa.

However, in the case of the small-scale or artisanal fishery fleet, reliable casualty data is not available, despite the predominance of accidents. "This is ironic, since the importance of this sector is evident from FAO estimates of the number of vessels and persons employed in the large-scale, medium-scale and artisanal fisheries.

In the artisanal sector, the incidence of loss of life and accidents on vessels may equal, or even exceed, that on commercial fleets, as these boats are often poorly equipped. According to one estimate, in the artisanal fisheries sector alone, each year around 12,000 men and 45,000 boats may well be lost in accidents at sea.

Such accidents rarely get reported, except when associated with major newsworthy events such as typhoons in the Philippines or tidal waves in Bangladesh. According to a retrospective national sea safety survey done in Guinea (Conakry for the three-year period 1988-91, the death toll touched 110, while 68 persons reported injuries, and equipment losses came close to $285,000.

The death rate due to accidents on fishing boats and transport canoes amounted to half a per cent of the 6,894 registered fishermen dying each year in accidents at sea.

Safety training for fishermen has, however, largely been targeted at persons serving on the larger fishing vessels, usually over 24 m. International conventions and subsequent legislation have been instrumental in setting minimum standards for the construction and equipment of vessels, and for the certification of the crew of these vessels.

It was only after 1988, when member governments of FAO, ILO and IMO approved a 'Document for Guidance on Fishermen's Training and Certification', that internationally acceptable guidelines were available for even smaller vessels.

This document addresses all vessels, irrespective of size. It sets considerable responsibilities on the relevant government departments of member countries.

Accident reporting

However, while economically developed countries with large or medium-size fishing fleets are well able to look after the training needs of fishing vessel crews, this is not true for developing nations where artisanal fisheries predominate. Often, there is neither a comprehensive method of reporting accidents nor legislation to cover the certification of crew members,

standards of construction and equipment to be carried. Further, there are no regular surveys to ensure the seaworthiness of vessels.

The first issue that needs to be tackled to reduce casualties in the artisanal sector is the lack of reliable data. FAO recommends that a survey of fishing craft and their range of operation is necessary to estimate the needs, goals and design parameters of a safety programme appropriate for the artisanal sector. This should be followed by a comprehensive survey of past accidents.

FAO, which works directly with small-scale fishermen in many parts of the world, has developed some practical training programmes on safety at sea. Useful safety tips and innovations for small boat fishermen are summarized in the FAO/South Pacific Commission Manual No. 28 of 1987.

But problems of safety at sea are unlikely to disappear overnight. "There have been great improvements in safety but the casualty rate is still 'the same: When technology improves, fishermen take greater risks. You keep pushing technology to the limit," says Andy R. Smith of FAO's Fisheries Department.

This piece is compiled from various sources by Chandrika Sharma of ICSF's Madras Office