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Liberia leads the field in seafarer identification technology

THE Liberian Registry has applauded the International Labour Organisation for adopting in its revised convention on seafarers' identity documents many of the initiatives pioneered by Liberia when introducing the world's first seafarers' biometric identification card. The Liberian programme, which got under way earlier this year, exceeds the ILO requirements in every respect.

Scott Bergeron, chief operating officer of the Liberian International Ship and Corporate Registry, the US company which operates the register, says, "Anyone comparing the objectives of the new ILO convention to the design, function and integrity of the Liberian registry's biometric identity card will clearly see that Liberia successfully anticipated the needs of the international shipping community. We welcome the implied confirmation that the Liberian Registry is the world leader in this specialist market in terms of expertise, technological excellence and practical application."

While Bergeron acknowledges some of the shortcomings of the revised ILO convention, he is quick to applaud the spirit behind it, and acknowledges the importance of the hard-won consensus which has been achieved between shipowners, seafarers and governments.

LISCR unveiled the world's first biometric seafarer identity cards at IMO headquarters in London in February this year as part of its overall initiative to help improve maritime security by providing a counterfeit-proof document. Shipowners and seafarers alike have welcomed the development as introducing more certainty and professionalism into the industry at a time when it faces, on a scale never seen before, both internal and external threats to its safety and security.

LISCR's design features, such as the use of an International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO)-recognised, two-dimension bar code and a fingerprint template, are intended to prevent fraud, and to verify identity, while keeping card production costs at a low level. Likewise, these specific features are all part of the ILO convention.

A vital aspect of Liberia's identity card is the Datastrip 2D two-dimensional bar code provided by Datastrip Inc, a world leader in identification technology. Liberia chose

Datastrip's technology because of its recognition by ICAO for use on machine-readable travel documents such as passports and visas. Of equal significance, it is the only two-dimensional bar code that provides enough storage capacity to hold multiple fingerprint templates and digital photographs on a credit card-sized document. Furthermore, its proactive error correction techniques are unparalleled. These features significantly improve identity verification and have the potential to provide consistency within the transportation industry as a whole.

The two-dimensional bar code on each Liberian biometric identity card contains two fingerprint templates, a digitised version of the cardholder's photograph, and the biographical information printed on the exterior of the card.

Identity verification will be performed on vessels and at ports of entry with Datastrip's DSVerify2D, the first hand-held biometric ID card reader capable of decoding fingerprints, text and photographs with one swipe. The reader includes an optical fingerprint scanner that can match the stored fingerprint template with the cardholder's live fingerprint on the spot, preventing identity fraud.

A six-month trial period of using the card on Liberian-flag vessels is due to end in August. Scott Bergeron says results so far have been "excellent". He points to the unique capacity of the Datastrip card. In particular, he says, its proactive error correction features offer verification capabilities which are vital when operating in the harsh environment of the marine industries.

Bergeron says, "Liberia has given a positive lead to other flag states, and indeed to the international shipping industry as a whole. Liberia understands the technology, knows how to use it, and is pleased to be able to share this know-how with the shipping industry. It is widely recognised as a market leader, and has been consulted by the US government in this capacity.

"We believe the Liberian ID system will become an industry standard for identifying seafarers around the world. The potential exists for such credentials to serve as a kind of passport that can be carried at all times, for shore leave, as allowed by the coastal state, for identification purposes and as a certification of the seaman's competence."

- The Liberian Registry is one of the world's largest and most active open registers, with a fifty-year track record of combining the highest standards for vessels and crews with the highest standards of responsive service to owners. It is proud to be on the Paris MOU White List of high-standard flags and the top ranked significant registry on the USCG Port State Control rankings. Almost 2,000 vessels of 54 m gt currently fly the Liberian flag.

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