



L I S C R, LLC

LIBERIAN INTERNATIONAL SHIP & CORPORATE REGISTRY

8619 Westwood Center Dr. 99 Park Avenue
Vienna, VA USA 22182 Suite 1700
Tel: 703 790 3434 New York, NY 10016-1601
Fax: 703 790 5655 Tel: 212 697 3434
info@liscr.com Fax: 212 697 5655

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Liberia signs landmark accord with US to suppress WMD proliferation by sea

THE Governments of Liberia and the United States have signed a landmark co-operation agreement covering measures to suppress the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and associated delivery systems and materials carried on vessels.

The Liberian Registry is the first ship registry to put in place the Proliferation Security Initiative, an international initiative to prohibit the spread of illegal weapons of mass destruction. The US-Liberia accord underlines both the position of the Liberian Registry at the cutting edge of measures to improve international security at sea and the international importance of the Registry. It also provides US protection to the quality ships flying the Liberian flag.

Yoram Cohen, ceo of the Liberian International Ship & Corporate Registry (LISCR), the US-headquartered manager of the Liberian Registry, says, "We applaud the initiative of the UN-backed National Transitional Government of Liberia. This agreement demonstrates the commitment of the Liberian Registry to transparency, and the confidence we have in the high quality of the owners who use the Liberian Registry. With this accord, the US and its allies can feel more secure, and our ships can feel more secure under the US security umbrella. It puts the world on notice - Liberian ships are not available for terrorist activities. LISCR is proud of our small part in facilitating agreement between the two Governments and in the trust that has been placed in us as the Competent Authority in the administration of the practical arrangements for international co-operation."

The agreement is designed to promote co-operation between the two nations to prevent the transportation by sea of WMD and related materials. It provides that action may be taken only against 'suspect vessels' as categorised in the agreement, and establishes rapid communication and cooperation, which may lead to authorised boarding and search in international waters by law enforcement officers of such vessels, and the cargo and persons on board.

Speaking last week at the National Defense University, US President George W. Bush said, "America and the nations of Australia, France and Germany, Italy and Japan, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom have launched the Proliferation Security Initiative to interdict lethal materials in transit. Our nations are sharing intelligence information, tracking suspect international cargo, conducting joint military exercises."

Representatives of the Liberian Registry on behalf of Liberia worked with US State Department officials to draft the PSI Boarding Agreement, which will now serve as a model for other flag states. Liberia has once again demonstrated its leadership in maritime safety and security.

A spokesman for the US State Department said, "This is a tangible example of non-proliferation cooperation, which President Bush advocated in his speech at the National Defense University. Liberia has the world's second largest ship registry and this agreement sends a strong signal to proliferators that the United States and Liberia will not allow the use of their vessels for the transport or transfer of items of proliferation concern. The conclusion of this ship boarding agreement is an important step in further operationalizing the Proliferation Security Initiative and strengthening the mechanisms that we have at our disposal to interdict suspect weapons of mass destruction-related cargoes."

At a practical level, each request to board and search a vessel must be accompanied by, among other things, an explanation of the basis for suspecting the vessel of being involved in the proliferation of WMD. If consent to board is given by LISCR, as agent for Liberia, and evidence of the proliferation of WMD is found, US officers are authorised to take preventative actions, pending instructions from the flag state authority.

At the signing ceremony in Washington on February 11, 2004, Yoram Cohen welcomed the agreement between the Liberian and US Governments. He said, "LISCR has always co-operated with, and received support from, the US State Department. Given the high level of terrorism alert and awareness which currently exists in the world, we believe it only right that all parties dedicated to eliminating the threat of terrorism should work together in a spirit of transparency and co-operation to that end.

"More than 2,000 ships are now registered in Liberia. That number continues to grow because of the Registry's reputation for efficiency, safety and excellence, and because Liberia, in taking a lead on all maritime security-related issues, has demonstrated its determination to take every conceivable precaution to protect its owners and prevent their ships being used for unlawful purposes.

The Liberian Registry is one of the world's largest and most active open registers, with a more than 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 in the top group of the Paris MOU White List of high-standard flags and the top ranked significant registry on the USCG Port State Control rankings. Over 2,000 vessels of almost 57m gt currently fly the Liberian flag.

For more information contact:
Yoram Cohen
LISCR

Issued by:
Chris Hewer
Merlin Corporate Communications
+44 1293 55 00 44
chris@merlinco.com