International Association of Classification Societies

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I. Introduction

The International Association of Classification Societies (IACS), headquartered in London, is made up of ten classification societies: Lloyds Register (LR), American Bureau of Shipping (ABS), Bureau Veritas (BV), China Classification Society (CCS), Det Norske Veritas (DNV), Germanischer Lloyd (GL), Korean Register (KR), Nippon Kaiji Kyokai (NK), Registro Italiano Navale (RINA), and the Russian Maritime Register of Shipping (RS), as well as the Indian Register of Shipping (IRS) as an associate member. According to the Maritime International Secretariat Services (www.marisec.org), there are 47,700 vessels in the world trading fleet made up principally of general cargo vessels, bulk carriers, container ships, tankers, and passenger vessels. If vessels smaller than 100 gross tons are included (too small to venture on the high seas or participate in international trade), the world fleet numbers close to 100,000. Most of the world’s trading vessels – nearly 41,000 in 2008 – are registered with classification society members of the IACS.

The remaining vessels are covered by non-IASC member classification societies. Classification societies develop and implement technical standards for ships and floating offshore oil production and storage facilities. These societies set rules to ensure the structural strength and integrity of the ship’s hull and its internal structure, cargo holds, bridge superstructure as well as the functional aspects and reliability of propulsion, steering systems, power generation, cargo handling, ship control, communication, navigation, emergency and other auxiliary systems. Ships must be built in compliance with these published rules in order to be registered. They must also be periodically surveyed and serious deficiencies must be corrected for them to remain ‘in class’. Classification societies are Recognized Organizations for Flag States in that flag states require that a vessel must be registered in a classification society as a prerequisite for flying the flag of the nation. Flag states have different regulations with regard to classification societies; for instance, ships flying the U.S. flag must be registered with the American Bureau of Shipping; ships flying the Liberian flag must be registered with a classification society
member of the IACS; ships flying the Panamanian flag can be registered with any classification society.

The published rules of classification societies cover a technical review of the design plans and related documents for a new vessel to verify compliance with the applicable rules. To ensure that these rules are being followed, classification society surveyors are present during the construction of a vessel in a shipyard and at associated production facilities that provide key components such as the engine, generators, cargo handling equipment, steering, and other components. The surveyors verify that the vessel is constructed in accordance with the classification rules, and upon satisfactory completion of construction and sea trials, the assignment of class is approved and a certificate of classification is issued. Once a vessel is in service, the owner must submit the vessel to a clearly specified programme of periodic class surveys to verify that the ship continues to meet the relevant conditions for remaining ‘in class’. The results of these surveys plus other reports dealing with damage and repair are carried onboard the vessel in order that they be available for inspection by port state control authorities and other interested parties.

II. Origins and Development

Classification societies emerged in 17th century London, the centre of world commerce at the time. Without any means of modern communication, merchants, shipowners, and marine insurance underwriters would congregate at coffee houses and taverns for face to face meetings to arrange for the shipping of goods and the insuring of ships and cargoes. One proprietor, Edward Lloyd, discovered that he could increase his business if he provided a place for the exchange of shipping information. Relevant shipping information was posted at Lloyd’s Coffee House for customers find out about available vessels, departure dates, destinations, as well as shipping and insurance rates. This made Lloyd’s Coffee House the centre of maritime business. But shippers and insurance underwriters had no ready source of information about the physical condition of vessels being employed and insured.

To address this need, The Register Society, the precursor to Lloyd’s Register Group, was founded in 1760 and the first Register of Ships (Green Book) was printed by the Society in 1764 to give underwriters and merchants an idea of the condition of vessels they insured and chartered. The Register contained details of the vessel’s owner, master, tonnage, date of build, place of construction, and number of guns (pirates were a constant threat). It also gave a classification for the condition of hull and equipment. The Society employed men with shipboard experience to undertake vessel inspections,