Seafarers’ Welfare Development in Southeast Asia: A Commentary

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Introduction

Alastair Couper’s contribution in this collection, “Perceptions and Attitudes of Seafarers Towards Maritime Regulations – An Historical Perspective,” provides a good overview of the history not only of national and international legal developments respecting seafarers but also has a few comments on the early role of Christian charities, seafarer unions, and other organizations in seafarer’s welfare in the 1800s. These cultural and religious roots explain why seafarers’ welfare services and work has primarily been provided by Christian faith-based institutions. There is some tradition of seafarer welfare organizations in Southeast Asia. While not necessarily the first seafarer welfare body in Southeast Asia, note can be made of the National Chinese Seamen’s Union (中華海員總工會)(NCSU), which was founded in 1946 in Shang-Hai, mainland China and moved to Taiwan with the Republic of China government in 1949, and has long been an active organization in Taiwan on seafarer welfare.2

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In more recent times, the Southeast Asia region is well-known as the origin of a disproportionally large number of seafarers serving onboard international shipping lines. The Philippines itself is considered the “Ship Manning Capital” of the world supplying the largest number of seafarers for the international maritime sector. Estimates showed that Filipinos comprise some 28.5 percent of the total maritime population who are on board vessels worldwide.

The Seafarers’ Rights International (SRI) Web site provides a different perspective with the Philippines having only 6.17 per cent of seafarers behind both China and Turkey. Nevertheless, the countries of Southeast Asia together, according to the SRI Web site, contribute over 30 per cent of world seafarers.

The most significant recent development in the welfare of seafarers has been the adoption by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2006 of the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC). Its primary focus is the enhancement of working conditions on vessels and better protection of the employment rights for seafarers.

Putting the above two developments together, the International Committee on Seafarer’s Welfare (ICSW), an international charity and a volunteer organization established for the purpose of bringing together appropriate interests in the field of seafarers’ welfare, took the opportunity to pay some attention to the Southeast Asia region. Having undertaken several regional programs regarding seafarers’ welfare in North and Central Latin America, the Commonwealth of Independent and Baltic States, the Indian Ocean and South East Africa, and West Africa, in 2007 the ICSW set out to develop

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3 For a now dated review of seafarers in Southeast Asia, see: Mary R. Brooks, ed., Seafarers in the ASEAN Region (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989).
6 Ibid.
9 Ibid.