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Safer, smoother passage

THE RM100 million Vessel Traffic System (VTS) or to monitor ships plying the Straits of Malacca, will be launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad next Thursday. And already it has been recognised as an effective tool to reduce the risk of accidents and other untoward incidents in one of the world's busiest waterways. According to the Marine Department Malaysia, the VTS - which was commissioned at the end of 1998 - uses a network of nine radar stations along 500km of the straits. It offers an all-important capability for interaction between vessels and onshore authorities to facilitate responses to navigational hazards, man-caused or otherwise. The system includes full-time operational control centres, staffed by trained personnel and equipped with state-of-the-art devices to gather information on vessel movements and sea conditions through radar and VHF radio links with ships. Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik had said that the system will make the straits much, much safer.

The VTS, by providing a constant stream of information from shore-based control centres to the mariners in the waterway, takes much of the guess work out of the decision-making process that is required for safe navigation. Together with the Singapore VTIS radar, the VTS system covers virtually the entire stretch of the shipping route in the Straits, including the Singapore Strait. However, cooperation remains the key to the successful implementation of any system, especially from the users, which in this case involves their diligent provision of essential information. This is indeed recognised by the authorities and the adoption of mandatory ship reporting under Chapter V of the 1974 Safety of Life at Sea Convention has been proposed.

A pertinent consideration for the acceptance of the expanded Traffic Separation Scheme is that the channels identified must be safe and free from obstruction, including those posed by errant vessels. Apart from the need for greater discipline, ships have to be able to navigate with a higher degree of accuracy, and in all weather conditions too. The VTS is therefore integral to complementary and support maritime services like the surveying and updating of the Straits' nautical charts; introduction of new navigational aids and improvement of existing ones; identification of the location of wrecks and shoals; building up of adequate response capability to pollution and other maritime catastrophes, including towage and salvage services; and improvement of radio communications and navigational warning systems.

A number of major incidents over the past few years in the Straits where about 600 vessels ply through every day are still fresh in our minds. The collision between the container vessel Ocean Blessing and tanker Nagasaki Spirit in northern Sumatra was one of the most serious. The resulting oil spill hit the coastline of Malaysia and Indonesia and cost millions of ringgit to clean up and immeasurable damage to the environment.

Still, the littoral states' move to implement the Traffic Separation Scheme would only be effective if there is an agreement with the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) to make it mandatory for every ship plying the Straits to report their presence. This proposal by Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand has been accepted in principle by the IMO Sub-Committee on Safety of Navigation. There is however still the question of cost of maintaining the VTS. It is only right that users should

contribute to the upkeep of a service that benefits them directly. The world's waterways are getting busier by the day and the VTS is precisely what is needed, but it is very costly to put and keep in place. Japan, which buys a lot of oil from West Asia and shipped via the Straits, should be among the first to help support the service. The major shipping companies ought to do their bit too considering the very significant savings they would chalk up from reduced accidents, lost cargoes, and safer and smoother voyages.

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