

International Maritime Organization (IMO)

(1) GENERAL

No new members joined the IMO with its membership remaining static again this year at 175 member states and three associate members (Faroe Islands, Hong Kong, and Macao). On 1 January, the 2022 amendments to Annexes 1 and 2 of the 1996 Protocol to the 1972 Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and other Matter (London Convention) entered into force. These amendments removed sewerage sludge from the list of permissible wastes that could be dumped at sea. Similarly, on 1 November, the 2022 Amendments to the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL) Annex II entered into force. No other new treaties relating to the environment entered into force.

On 3 January, Switzerland became the eleventh state to lodge its instrument of acceptance of the 2009 Amendment to the 1996 Protocol to the London Convention. This amendment will enter into force on the sixtieth day after two-thirds of the contracting parties have deposited their instrument of acceptance.

On 18 October, the Solomon Islands lodged its instrument of accession to the 1978 and 1988 Protocols to the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) (as amended). On 17 August, Albania acceded to the 1988 Protocol relating to SOLAS. On 13 October, Serbia also acceded to the same protocol.

On 8 March, Barbados deposited its instrument of accession to the 1971 Convention relating to Civil Liability in the Field of Maritime Carriage of Nuclear Material, the 1990 International Convention on Oil Pollution Preparedness, Response and Co-operation, and the 2000 Protocol on Preparedness, Response and Co-operation to Pollution Incidents by Hazardous and Noxious Substances. Iraq also acceded to the latter protocol as well as the 2001 International Convention on Civil Liability for Bunker Oil Pollution Damage, the 2001 International Convention on the Control of Harmful Anti-Fouling Systems on Ships, and the 2007 Nairobi International Convention on the Removal of Wrecks (Nairobi Convention) on 8 August. On 11 September, Iraq also lodged its instrument of accession to the 1996 Protocol to the London Convention.

On 17 March, Cote d'Ivoire lodged its instrument of accession to the 2007 Nairobi Convention and the 2004 International Convention for the Control and Management of Ships' Ballast Water and Sediments. Ireland acceded to the latter treaty on 17 March. On 28 November, the Seychelles also acceded to the Nairobi Convention.

In a significant development, Bangladesh—a nation with a significant ship breaking and recycling industry—lodged its instrument of ratification of the 2009 Hong Kong International Convention for the Safe and Environmentally Sound Recycling of Ships. In addition, on 28 March and 30 November respectively, Portugal and Pakistan lodged their instruments of accession to the same convention.

The IMO Assembly met for its thirty-third session on 27 November–6 December. As well as endorsing the IMO's Strategic Plan for the period 2024–29, the Assembly elected a new forty-member council composed as follows: (i) Category (a): ten states with the largest interest in providing international shipping services, namely: China, Greece, Italy, Japan, Liberia, Norway, Panama, the Republic of Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States; (ii) Category (b): ten states with the largest interest in the international seaborne trade, namely: Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, India, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the United Arab Emirates; and (iii) Category (c): twenty states not elected under Category (a) or (b) above that have special interests in maritime transport or navigation, and whose election to the council will ensure the representation of all major geographic areas of the world, namely: Bahamas, Bangladesh, Chile, Cyprus, Denmark, Egypt, Finland, Indonesia, Jamaica, Kenya, Malaysia, Malta, Mexico, Morocco, Peru, the Philippines, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and Türkiye.

The IMO Council held its 129th session on 17–21 July and appointed Arsenio Antonio Dominguez Velasco from Panama as IMO Secretary-General for a four-year term, beginning on 1 January 2024. The IMO Council also met on 21–4 November, but no work of significance to the environment was considered at this meeting (<<http://www.imo.org/>>).

(2) NEW INSTRUMENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

There were no new instruments of note relating to the environment negotiated this year.

(3) MARINE ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION COMMITTEE (MEPC)

At its eightieth meeting, held on 3–7 July, the MEPC adopted the 2023 IMO Strategy on Reduction of Greenhouse Gas Emissions from Ships, which includes an enhanced common ambition to reach net zero emissions for international shipping by 2050 and a commitment to ensure uptake of alternative zero and near-zero greenhouse gas fuels by 2030. The MEPC endorsed the designation of a particularly sensitive sea area in the north-western Mediterranean to protect cetaceans from international shipping. The MEPC agreed on the effective date of 1 January 2025 for the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden special areas under MARPOL Annexes I and V. The MEPC approved revised guidelines for the reduction of underwater noise from commercial shipping (<<http://www.imo.org/>>).

(4) MARITIME SAFETY COMMITTEE (MSC)

The MSC held its 107th session on 31 May–9 June. Although this meeting dealt with significant safety issues, the only issues considered to be of significance with respect to the environment were the adoption of amendments to the International Code of Safety for Ships Operating in Polar Waters for non-SOLAS ships, such as fishing vessels and pleasure yachts, operating in polar waters (<<http://www.imo.org/>>).

(5) LEGAL COMMITTEE

The Legal Committee held its 110th session on 27–31 March. A significant amount of the work at this meeting was dominated by an agenda item relating to addressing ship-to-ship oil transfers and tankers of the so-called ‘dark fleet,’ or ships that obscure their identities by various means, including turning off Automatic Identification System transponders. The Legal Committee determined that these were high-risk activities that undermine the international regime with respect to maritime safety, environmental protection, and liability and compensation and that need to be addressed. The Legal Committee endorsed a range of measures open to states to address this issue.

The Legal Committee again expressed concern about the negative impact of the Russian Federation’s invasion of Ukraine and the impact on shipping of the Black Sea, the Sea of Azov, and the Kerch Strait. The Legal Committee demanded that the Russian Federation immediately cease the use of force against Ukraine and abide by its obligations under international law, especially in regard to the free passage of vessels in the northern part of the Black Sea, the Sea of Azov, and the Kerch Strait.

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