

Ageing vessels a safety hazard

By SUSAN FURLONG

THE number of shipping accidents could increase over the next decade because of an ageing world fleet and poorly-trained crews, according to a salvaging industry official.

The president of the International Salvage Union, Mr Klaas Reinigert, said yesterday the proportion of the world fleet over 15 years old would rise from 54 per cent in 1991 to 62 per cent in 1996.

Mr Reinigert, a native of Holland, is in Hongkong for the annual meeting of the International Salvage Union, which has 39 members in 27 countries.

Quoting from a recent study by French-based maritime consultant Tecnicas, he said a disproportionate share of all recorded shipping accidents in 1989 and 1990 involved vessels aged 15 years or over.

But while ageing ships were more at risk, about 60 per cent of accidents were caused by human error, highlighting the need for higher standards of training, he added.

The director of the Hongkong Shipowners' Association, Mr Michael Farlie, said ageing vessels posed a serious problem for the local shipping industry. There are about 1,200 Hongkong-owned ships.

But Mr Farlie denied that ageing fleets would translate into a higher rate of shipping accidents.

Safety could be improved by ensuring crews were properly trained, he said.

The shipowners had committed \$500,000 this year to training programmes for deck and engineering cadets, Mr Farlie said. Depending on the success of the initiative, more money would be set aside for training in the future.

The Marine Department's Assistant Director, Mr Tsui Shung-yiu, said it was wrong to assume ageing ships were inherently more dangerous. If older vessels were well maintained they could be as safe as newer ones, he said.

Mr Tsui said operators of the 190 large vessels on Hongkong's shipping register were required to hold recognised certificates of competence.

Vessels listed with the register were also required to pass regular inspections.

But he admitted only about 10 per cent of the Hongkong-owned and operated fleet was listed on the local ships' register. Ships registered elsewhere would not necessarily face the same safety regulations, he said.