

## Checks for ships eased to aid trade

By KAREN CHENG

SHIPS from former Eastern bloc countries and Vietnam can now enter Hongkong waters free of immigration examination, a move likely to boost bilateral trade.

But Assistant Director of Immigration Mr Choy Ping-tai was confident the relaxation would not open the door to smuggling activities as past records of ships from these countries showed there was no cause for concern, and the department would maintain spot checks.

For the first six months of this year, 570 ships came from the former Eastern bloc countries and Vietnam, an increase of 60 per cent over the same period last year.

Mr Choy said their records showed they had never engaged in illegal activities and no crewmen had been arrested. Therefore, the department had decided to grant them the right to apply for a pre-arrival clearance (PAC).

The ships can now apply for a PAC before leaving their last port before arriving in Hongkong within a maximum of 48 hours.

Once the applications are approved, the ships can enter Hongkong waters without the need to stop at anchorages off Lei Yu Mun or Lantau Island for inspection.

At present, more than half the ships sailing into Hongkong are given PACs and Mr Choy said they had not encountered any problems.

It is understood the only country not now entitled to a PAC is North Korea.

Chinese ships are generally not given the privilege also because of the problem of illegal immigrants.

Mr Choy also pointed out that the move could lead to a staff saving of 10 per cent, with some officers being redeployed to other duties. The division currently employs 80 officers.