

Seafarers' Identity Documents: Background

One of the issues considered crucial for improving maritime security is ensuring that seafarers have documents enabling their "positive verifiable identification". Many countries will be requiring such identification before they are prepared to grant special facilities enabling seafarers to carry out the international professional moves necessary for their work and for their well-being. The ILO Governing Body accordingly decided to complement action being taken in the framework of the IMO by placing an urgent item on the agenda of the 91st Session (June 2003) of the International Labour Conference concerning improved security of seafarers' identification with a view to the revision of the Seafarers' Identity Documents Convention, 1958 (No.108).

Convention No.185 was accordingly adopted by the 91st Session of the International Labour Conference. The Convention provides for a new seafarers' identity document facilitating the movement of seafarers, but not replacing a passport. It introduces a viable system for meeting contemporary security concerns while maintaining the necessary facilitation of shipping and recognition of the needs of seafarers. The Convention requires each ratifying country to put in place a comprehensive security regime. This would cover not only the production by the national authorities of a modern identity document embodying security features, but also the maintenance of national databases for the document. In addition, the processes and procedures for the production, personalization and issuance of the document, which would include quality control of the entire national system, would be subject to international oversight (Article 5 and Annex III of the Convention).

The International Labour Conference also adopted, at the same time, a Resolution concerning the development of the global interoperable biometric. This resolution was discussed at the 288th session (November 2003) of the Governing Body, which approved a plan of action to be pursued by the Office for the adoption of the technical specifications for the interoperable biometric template.

At the 289th Session (March 2004), the Office submitted to the Governing Body as a matter of urgency a document accompanied by draft technical reports which called for a decision on the selection of the type of fingerprint biometric template, i.e. either "pattern" or "minutiae" based. After considerable discussions, the Governing Body selected the "minutiae-based" method and endorsed the **technical report ILO SID-0002** as embodying the standard for the fingerprint template required under the Convention No.185.

Accordingly, the ILO conducted a biometric technology test with potential biometric vendors and integrators of biometric systems, to ensure compliance of biometric technology to both ILO Convention No. 185 and the ILO biometric standard (SID-0002).

The Governing Body also considered the Resolution concerning technical cooperation relating to seafarer's identity documents adopted by the Conference. In keeping with this Resolution, based on a document submitted by the Office, at the 288th session (November 2003), the Governing Body requested the Director-General to give due priority, in the use of resources allocated to the Organization's technical cooperation programme, to assisting countries with respect to the technology, expertise and process required. The Governing Body at its 289th Session (March 2004) endorsed the need to provide technical assistance to developing countries in particular to enable them to ratify and implement the Convention and the biometric standard adopted.

With adoption of the Convention No. 185 and the interoperable biometric standard, Member States of the ILO can now proceed to ratify and implement the Convention No.185, beginning the issuance of identity documents to seafarers.