



Ref. T2/6.03

**GUIDELINES FOR AVOIDING FALSE  
DISTRESS ALERTS**

- 1 The Sub-Committee on Radiocommunications, at its fortieth session (16 to 20 January 1995), prepared a draft Assembly resolution on guidelines for avoiding false distress alerts, given at annex. The guidelines are expected to be approved by the sixty-fifth session of the Maritime Safety Committee and submitted for adoption by the nineteenth Assembly.
- 2 In view of the urgency of reducing the number of false distress alerts now occurring, as outlined in the draft Assembly resolution, the Sub-Committee approved circulation of the guidance pending its adoption by the Assembly and invited the Maritime Safety Committee to endorse this decision.
- 3 Governments are invited to bring the guidance to the attention of all concerned.

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## ANNEX

**DRAFT ASSEMBLY RESOLUTION ON GUIDELINES FOR  
AVOIDING FALSE DISTRESS ALERTS**

THE ASSEMBLY,

RECALLING Article 15(j) of the Convention on the International Maritime Organization (IMO) concerning the functions of the Assembly in relation to regulations and guidelines concerning maritime safety and the prevention and control of marine pollution from ships,

CONSIDERING problems reported by Member Governments related to the proper operation of the GMDSS, in particular that false distress alerts are becoming a major problem to the efficient operation of search and rescue (SAR) services,

RECALLING that the GMDSS was developed on the basis of resolution 6 to the International Conference on Maritime Search and Rescue, 1979 and that according to that resolution, the GMDSS should provide, among other things, the essential radio elements of the international SAR plan,

NOTING that the excessive amount of false distress alerts creates a serious and unnecessary burden on Rescue Co-ordination Centres (RCCs), may have adverse effects on seafarers' confidence in the GMDSS and could also have potentially serious effects on real distress situations and the safety of life at sea,

BEING AWARE that, if a substantive reduction in the number of false distress alerts now occurring is not achieved in the near future, the quality and efficiency of SAR organizations might be jeopardized,

CONSIDERING that an urgent dissemination of some of the problems which have become evident to rescue service providers would help in the education of people and organizations involved and eventually contribute to a reduction in the number of false distress alerts,

CONSIDERING ALSO that Administrations, manufacturers, educators, users, communication and rescue service providers and all others concerned need guidance on ways and means of reducing false distress alerts,

HAVING CONSIDERED the recommendations made by the Maritime Safety Committee at its [sixty-fifth] session,

1. ADOPTS the Guidelines for Avoiding False Distress Alerts, set out in the annex to the present resolution;
2. URGES Governments to bring them to the attention of all concerned.

ANNEX

GUIDELINES FOR AVOIDING FALSE DISTRESS ALERTS

1 Administrations should:

- .1 inform shipowners and seafarers about the implications of the rising number of false distress alerts;
- .2 make important provisions for ships to properly register all GMDSS equipment, and ensure that this registration data is readily available to RCCs;
- .3 consider establishing and using national violation enforcement measures to prosecute those who:
  - .3.1 inadvertently transmit a false distress alert without proper cancellation, or who fail to respond to a distress alert due to misuse or negligence;
  - .3.2 repeatedly transmit false distress alerts; and
  - .3.3 deliberately transmit false distress alerts;
- .4 use the International Telecommunication Union violation reporting process for false distress alerts, or for failure to respond to a distress alert relayed from shore-to-ship;
- .5 ensure that all relevant ship personnel know how GMDSS equipment operates, the importance of avoiding false distress alerts and the necessary steps to be taken to prevent transmitting false distress alerts and the procedures to be followed when a false distress alert has been transmitted;
- .6 inform type-approval authorities of false distress alert problems to draw their attention to testing and alerting functions of radio equipment during the type approval process;
- .7 urge companies installing radio equipment to train relevant ship personnel to ensure they are familiar with operation of the installed equipment;
- .8 investigate the cause when a specific model of GMDSS equipment repeatedly transmits unwanted distress alerts and inform appropriate organizations accordingly;
- .9 ensure that surveyors and inspectors are informed about GMDSS equipment, and particularly how to operate and test it without transmitting a false distress alert; and
- .10 require that GMDSS radio operators be appropriately certificated.

## 2 Manufacturers, suppliers and installers should:

- .1 design equipment for distress alerting so that:
  - .1.1 it will not be possible to transmit a distress alert unintentionally;
  - .1.2 the panel for emergency operation is separated from the one for normal operation and is partially fitted with a cover and the switches on the panel are clearly classified by colouring; and
  - .1.3 there are standardized arrangements of operation panels and operational procedures;
- .2 design test features so that the testing of GMDSS equipment will not result in transmitting false distress alerts;
- .3 ensure that any distress alert activation is indicated visually or acoustically, or both and shows that the equipment is transmitting a distress alert, until manually deactivated;
- .4 ensure that the satellite EPIRB position on board, installations (including the release and activation mechanisms) and handling procedures preclude unwanted activation (designing the EPIRB so that when it is out of its bracket it must also be immersed in water to activate automatically. When operated manually a two-step activation action is required);
- .5 provide clear and precise operational instructions that are easy to understand (maintenance and operational instructions should be separated, and should be delivered in English and any other language deemed necessary);
- .6 ensure that when any GMDSS equipment has been installed, necessary instructions are given to appropriate ship personnel, specifically pointing out the operational procedures (a record should be kept that such instructions have been given); and
- .7 ensure that supplier and installation personnel understand how the GMDSS works, and the consequences of transmitting a false distress alert.

## 3 Trainers and educators should:

- .1 ensure that maritime education centres are informed and teach about false distress alert problems and implications to SAR, the GMDSS, etc., and the procedures to be followed if a false distress alert is transmitted;
- .2 obtain and use actual case histories as examples when teaching;
- .3 emphasise the need to avoid false distress alerts in all maritime training and education; and
- .4 ensure that no inadvertent transmission of a false distress alert occurs when training on GMDSS equipment.

- 4 Companies, Masters and seafarers should, as appropriate:
- .1 ensure that all GMDSS certificated personnel responsible for sending a distress alert have been instructed and are competent to operate the particular radio equipment on the ship;
  - .2 ensure that the person or persons responsible for communications during distress incidents give necessary instructions and information to all crew members who should know how to use GMDSS equipment to send a distress alert;
  - .3 ensure that during each abandon ship drill instruction is given on how emergency equipment should be used to provide GMDSS functions;
  - .4 ensure that GMDSS equipment testing is only undertaken under supervision of the person responsible for communications during distress incidents;
  - .5 ensure that GMDSS equipment testing or drills are never allowed to cause false distress alerts;
  - .6 ensure that encoded identities of satellite EPIRBs, which are used by SAR personnel responding to emergencies, are properly registered in a database accessible 24 hours per day or automatically provided to SAR authorities (masters should confirm that their EPIRBs have been registered with such a database to help SAR services identify the ship in the event of distress and rapidly obtain other information to help them respond appropriately);
  - .7 ensure that EPIRB, INMARSAT and DSC registration data is immediately updated, if the ship's owner, name, flag or similar information changes, and, necessary action is taken to reprogramme the ships new data in the GMDSS equipment concerned;
  - .8 ensure that, for new ships, positions for installing EPIRBs are considered at the earliest stage of ship design and construction;
  - .9 ensure that satellite EPIRBs are carefully installed in accordance with manufacturers' instructions and using qualified personnel (sometimes satellite EPIRBs are damaged or broken due to improper handling or installation. They must be installed in a proper location to float-free and automatically activate if the ship sinks. Care must be taken that they are not tampered with or accidentally activated. If the coding must be changed or the batteries serviced, manufacturers' requirements must be strictly followed. There have been cases of attaching EPIRB lanyards to the ship so the EPIRB cannot float free; the lanyards are only to be used by survivors for securing the EPIRB to a survival craft or person in water.);

- .10 ensure that EPIRBs are not activated if assistance is already immediately available (EPIRBs are intended to call for assistance if the ship is unable to obtain help by other means, and to provide position information and homing signals for SAR units);
- .11 ensure that if a distress alert has been accidentally transmitted, the ship makes every reasonable attempt to communicate with the RCC by any means to cancel the false distress alert using the procedures given in the appendix;
- .12 ensure that, if possible, after emergency use, the EPIRB is retrieved and deactivated; and
- .13 ensure that when an EPIRB is damaged and needs to be disposed of, or if a ship is sold for scrap or for any other reason a satellite EPIRB will no longer be used, the satellite EPIRB is made inoperable by either removing its battery and if possible returning it to the manufacturer or by demolishing it.

Note: If the EPIRB is returned to the manufacturer it should be wrapped in tin foil to prevent transmission of signals during shipment.

**Appendix**

**INSTRUCTIONS FOR MARINERS AND OTHERS\*\*  
FOR CANCELLING A FALSE DISTRESS ALERT**

**DSC**

**1 VHF**

- .1 switch off transmitter immediately\*
- .2 switch equipment on and set to Channel 16
- .3 make broadcast to "All Stations" giving name of vessel, callsign and DSC number, and cancel the false distress alert.

**Example**

All Stations, All Stations, All Stations  
This is NAME, CALLSIGN,  
DSC NUMBER, POSITION.

Cancel my distress alert of  
DATE, TIME, UTC.  
= Master, NAME, CALLSIGN,  
DSC NUMBER, DATE, TIME UTC.

**2 MF**

- .1 switch off equipment immediately\*
  - .2 switch equipment on and tune for radiotelephony transmission on 2,182 kHz
- make broadcast to "All Stations" giving the vessel's name, callsign and DSC number, and cancel the false distress alert.

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\* This applies when the false alert is detected during transmission.

\*\* Appropriate signals should precede these messages in accordance with the ITU Radio Regulations chapter N1X.

**Example**

All Stations, All Stations, All Stations  
This is NAME, CALLSIGN,  
DSC NUMBER, POSITION.

Cancel my distress alert of  
DATE, TIME, UTC.  
= Master NAME, CALLSIGN.  
DSC NUMBER, DATE, TIME UTC.

**3 HF**

As for MF but the alert must be cancelled on all the frequency bands on which it was transmitted. Hence, in stage 2.2 the transmitter should be tuned consecutively to the radiotelephony distress frequencies in the 4, 6, 8, 12 and 16 MHz bands, as necessary.

**INMARSAT-C**

4 Notify the appropriate RCC to cancel the alert by sending a distress priority message via the same CES through which the false distress alert was sent.

**Example of message**

NAME, CALLSIGN, IDENTITY NUMBER,  
POSITION,  
Cancel my INMARSAT-C distress  
alert of DATE, TIME, UTC  
= Master +

**EPIRBs**

5 If, for any reason, an EPIRB is activated accidentally, the ship should contact the nearest coast station or an appropriate coast earth station or RCC and cancel the distress alert.

**General**

6 Notwithstanding the above, a ship may use any means available to them to inform the appropriate authorities that a false distress alert has been transmitted and should be cancelled.

7 No action will normally be taken against any ship or mariner for reporting and cancelling a false distress alert. However, in view of the serious consequences of false alerts, and the strict ban on their transmission, Governments may prosecute in cases of repeated violations.