

Marine casualty

Very serious marine casualty: Collision involving a fishing vessel and a fishing boat

What happened?

At about midnight, a large fishing- and processing vessel (GT 7,646) was searching for fish in the Mauritanian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Suddenly, the officer on watch detected a dim light. Despite the immediately initiated evasive manoeuvre by way of precaution, a contact with the anchor line of a small fishing boat (so called pirogue with a length of 14 m), now emerging as the source of the light, could not be prevented. The fishing boat was caught by the fishing vessel, dragged to her hull and exposed to a strong jet of cooling water, which was discharged permanently from her hull. The cooling water poured into the open fishing boat, filling her continuously with water. The fishing boat foundered in no time at all. Three crewmembers of the fishing boat could be recovered unhurt from the sea in the course of the immediately initiated rescue operation. The search for the other fishermen remained unsuccessful.

Why did it happen?

- The wooden fishing boat did not exhibit the lights prescribed in the International Regulations for the Prevention of Collision at Sea (COLREGs), and was neither equipped with an AIS-transmitter nor a radar reflector. Therefore, the crew on the fishing vessel's bridge could only detect the fishing boat very late.
- The fisherman on board the fishing boat who was allocated the task of keeping the lookout, fell asleep and was therefore unable to draw attention to the boat by transmitting warning signals.
- The fishermen on board the fishing boat were unable to cut the anchor line because they lacked a proper tool for doing so. Therefore, the boat could not leave the hazardous area.
- There were no life jackets or other lifesaving appliances on board the fishing boat. Some of the fishermen were non-swimmers.

What can we learn?

Small fishing boats in the coastal waters and EEZ's of developing countries are general not exhibiting the lights and signals prescribed in the COLREGs. Moreover, the boats are often not identifiable as echoes in the radar and do generally not transmit an AIS signal. Their crews work and live on the boats under adverse conditions and are therefore, especially in the night, unable to ensure a reliable lookout who is able to alert the crew in hazardous situations in a timely manner and transmit distress signals.

Ships commands and crews of large fishing vessels as well as merchant ships and cruise ships must always be aware of their special responsibility, especially in sea areas where traditional coastal fishery takes place, as far as the prevention of close quarter's situations with coastal fishing boats is concerned. The latter are barely able to make a sufficient and reliable contribution for preventing hazardous situations due to their inadequate safety- and equipment standards in their countries of origin.

In order to satisfy this responsibility, the following should be done:

- Circumnavigate, as far as possible, areas in which intensified coastal fishery takes place sparsely,
- keeping a focussed, unimpeded and continuous lookout should be of paramount importance within the scope of the bridge and lookout management,
- it should be considered to assign a second able bodied seaman, at least during night times, to keep a lookout in areas where increased approaches of traditional fishing boats are to be expected.

Who may benefit?

Ship's commands, seafarers, ship's owners