



JAMS LONDON REPRESENTATIVE OFFICE

Introduction to the Activities of the IMRF

◆ Introduction

Since its establishment in 1983, the London Office of the Japan Association of Marine Safety has conducted research and collected information on policy developments relating to maritime affairs and maritime security in Europe, including those at the International Maritime Organization (IMO), a specialised agency of the United Nations. In addition, through participation in various international conferences and other forums, the Office has sought to exchange views and information with relevant organisations. The IMRF is one such organisation.

Maritime accident prevention and search and rescue (SAR) are closely interconnected. As a result, our Office has frequent opportunities to engage with the IMRF and, through those exchanges, to gain valuable insights into international developments and safety-related issues. Given the IMRF's long-standing ties with Japan, this article provides an overview of its activities.

This article is intended to support a better understanding of international discussions and practical knowledge relating to maritime safety by introducing the activities of the IMRF on the basis of publicly available information. It is not intended to support or recommend any particular organisation, nor to assess organisations in comparative terms.

◆ Organisational Overview of the IMRF

• Background and History



The International Maritime Rescue Federation (IMRF) is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) with a long history as an international network

through which organisations involved in maritime search and rescue (SAR) can cooperate across borders and share expertise. Its origins can be traced back to the International Lifeboat Federation (ILF), which was established in 1924 following the International Lifeboat Conference held in London. [\[1\]](#)

From a Japanese perspective, it is particularly noteworthy that Japanese representatives played a role in the establishment of this international framework. Representatives of Japan's lifeboat organisations attended the conference and emphasised the importance of maintaining regular meetings among the lifeboat organisations of different countries in order to build a framework for international cooperation. They also proposed that steps should be taken to establish an international organisation for maritime rescue, and this proposal is reported to have been accepted by the conference. [\[2\]](#)

Although national systems and organisational structures for lifesaving at sea differ from country to country, many of the challenges faced in practice are shared. Against that background, efforts to promote the international sharing of knowledge began at an early stage. Japan's involvement in that formative period is symbolically significant when viewed in the context of today's international SAR cooperation.

Over time, the ILF expanded the scope of its activities in response to the development of international SAR arrangements and the growing complexity of operational challenges, eventually evolving into the present-day IMRF. Although it is not itself an intergovernmental organisation, it has maintained a meaningful presence as a forum for bringing together the practical expertise of those engaged in maritime rescue. [\[3\]](#)

•Purpose and Character of the Organisation

The IMRF's purpose is, in simple terms, to "reduce loss of life in the world's waters." Its membership includes lifeboat organisations, coast guard agencies,

navies, private rescue organisations, and related industries, and it brings together a broad range of participants from both the public and private sectors, including both professional and volunteer personnel. [\[4\]](#)

The IMRF holds consultative status with the International Maritime Organization (IMO) as a non-governmental organisation and contributes practical expertise on maritime SAR through relevant meetings and other international forums. [\[5\]](#)

•Overview of IMRF Activities

The IMRF's activities are not confined to any particular sea area or country. Rather, its emphasis is on identifying and sharing those elements that can be applied more widely, while recognising the different circumstances that exist across countries and regions. In practical terms, its work supports front-line operations in the following ways: [\[6\]](#)

- Guidance and reports: The IMRF prepares documents on such matters as multi-agency coordination, exercise design, and operational lessons learned, in forms that can be readily referenced and adapted by different countries.
- Training and capacity building: It presents approaches to exercises and training materials that can be tailored to regional conditions, including the marine environment, organisational arrangements, equipment, and communications systems.
- Conferences and workshops: It provides opportunities for learning on practical themes such as coordination, communications, command and control, medical evacuation, and public communications, including for organisations with more limited operational experience.
- Engagement with international systems and standards: One of the key documents underpinning the international SAR system is the IAMSAR Manual, jointly developed by the IMO and ICAO. Through its consultative role at the IMO, the IMRF is able to provide information and submit views, follow developments in related agenda items including IAMSAR, and help frame practical issues on the basis of operational experience,

thereby contributing to international discussions from an operational perspective.

◆ Recent Activities

• Work Relating to Mass Rescue Operations

Mass Rescue Operations (MROs) refer to situations in which large numbers of people require rescue at the same time, potentially overwhelming normal SAR capacity. Examples include cruise ship or ferry accidents, offshore fires, and aircraft ditching at sea.

This is a classic low-frequency, high-impact field. Experience is inherently difficult to accumulate, yet when such an event does occur it requires a full national or regional response. The value of the IMRF's MRO guidance [\[7\]](#) and related training material lies in providing a common framework for planning, training, and multi-agency coordination in such circumstances.

In particular, MROs involve not only rescue operations at the scene, but also simultaneous demands in command and control, communications, medical evacuation, port response, media handling, and the involvement of local authorities and private-sector actors. IMRF materials are useful as practical checklists, helping to ensure that key issues are considered comprehensively while still recognising differences in national systems. [\[8\]](#)

• Addressing New Challenges

In recent years, the operating environment for SAR has itself been changing. Climate-related factors—such as increasingly severe sea conditions, extreme weather, a rise in coastal disasters, and changes in shipping routes and areas of activity—have implications for operational safety, equipment, training, and personnel availability. The IMRF is working on initiatives such as FutureSAR [\[9\]](#) to translate these long-term trends into practical issues for operational responders. [\[10\]](#)

Another important theme is the creation of mechanisms for sharing lessons learned from accidents, near misses, and training in order to accelerate learning. Data sharing in this field is often difficult because legal frameworks and organisational cultures differ across countries. At the same time, where such sharing is possible, it can contribute directly to preventing recurrence and strengthening safety culture. The IMRF's work in this area, including SaferSAR, demonstrates that its focus extends beyond rescue techniques alone to include organisational learning. [\[11\]](#)

•Global SAR Review

The IMRF is also undertaking an initiative to review global maritime SAR more broadly, identify capability gaps and emerging risks, and set out key issues and recommendations for the next 10 to 20 years. The resulting outputs are expected to help national maritime safety authorities assess issues such as RCC operations, multi-agency coordination, MRO response, human resources, equipment renewal, and training systems using common international benchmarks and terminology, thereby enabling a more objective review of their own national arrangements.

The review is also expected to be useful for the wider maritime community. By clarifying the role of private-sector actors within the chain from distress alerting to rescue and medical evacuation—including assistance from passing vessels, communications and information infrastructure, equipment support, and training support—it may help identify where public-private cooperation can be improved and where future investment and cooperation should be directed.

The review draws on literature surveys, interviews, online questionnaires, and regional workshops in order to incorporate operational perspectives from the field, and the final report is scheduled for publication in January 2027.

In addition, through its workshops, the IMRF helps practitioners share operational challenges in ways that make them directly relevant to others and broaden the range of possible responses. Such peer-to-peer exchanges are expected to generate insights that cannot easily be gained from written material alone, including practical judgement in decision-making, examples of coordination failures, and ideas for improving exercise design. [\[12\]](#)



◆ Concluding Remarks

The above has provided a brief introduction to the IMRF, one of the organisations with which we engage.

Based in London, the IMRF is an NGO that supports national preparedness by sharing practical maritime SAR expertise internationally, developing guidance, and providing forums for discussion. For the JAMS London Office, maintaining ongoing contact with IMRF personnel is valuable in enabling us to keep track of international developments relevant to maritime accident prevention. As a personal aside, I find it both significant and encouraging that Japan was involved in the establishment of the IMRF, including its predecessor organisation, some 100 years ago.

Maritime accident prevention is concerned with avoiding incidents before they occur. At the same time, the ability to minimise the consequences when an accident does occur—in other words, the quality of SAR—is also an important element of safety culture. One of the distinguishing features of the IMRF's work is that it systematises lessons learned from rescue operations and shares them in a form that can readily be referenced by other countries and organisations.

The IMRF's work also provides useful reference material for considering such issues as MROs, climate change, and mechanisms for organisational learning. The JAMS London Office will continue to gather information through relevant organisations, including the IMRF, and to disseminate appropriate information on the basis of the knowledge thereby obtained.

Ryosuke Tateishi

Director

Japan Association of Marine Safety London Office

