

MARITIME SAFETY EMBRELLA OPERATION – 5-6 JUNE 2007

Interregional Maritime Safety Projects Fair

Opening remarks reception Town Hall

Cdt J. VERBIST

Antwerp Port Authority

Ladies and gentlemen,

Distinguished guests,

On behalf of the Antwerp Port Authority I am honoured to welcome you in Antwerp at this magnificent location, the Antwerp City Hall. Herewith, I apologise the President of the Port Authority, Alderman Marc Van Peel, who unfortunately could not be present here today to welcome you personally. We, the port authority, are very proud that you have chosen Antwerp as your preferred location for the organisation of your annual projects fair. And indeed, I couldn't agree more... The Port of Antwerp together with the other competent authorities have made their first priority of safe and secure navigation to and from our port..

I am very proud to announce that our port is doing very well. Last year we handled 167 million tons of maritime cargo, ensuring our position as second largest port in Europe. Almost half of the total number of cargo was transported in containers. We have experienced an expansive growth in the container trade in the last decade. And also for the future we will face some important challenges on this field.

However our focus is not only on securing our position as a leading and global container port. In fact, Antwerp has much more to offer than pure container handling facilities. Indeed, our port has always cherished the traditional soft commodity trades such as coffee, cacao and others. But also in general cargo such as steel, cars, forest products as well as liquid bulk our port has a leading position.

Flanders and Antwerp in particular would like to continue in being the gateway to Europe. Rotterdam and Antwerp together handle about 25% of all imports and exports of Europe. That means that we need a sustainable mobility in which maritime transport play a very important role.

Being a leading port in Europe means that you have to choose the path of “quality” and leading the battle for improving the image of the maritime sector. In that respect Antwerp supports in particular the new initiatives of the European Commission such as its 3rd Maritime Safety Package: A better targeted port state control system, the high performance of classification societies, an efficient framework for the places of refuge are just a few examples of prime interest.

Another vital element in quality shipping is the human factor. In this there is a threat coming from the inside: the increasing shortage of European seafarers in particularly officers. This shortage and the decreasing maritime know how represent a real threat not only to the maritime profession itself, but also to the entire maritime cluster. We, as a port authority, are deeply concerned about this situation. Almost every day we are confronted in our port with bad communication between ship and shore due to lack of knowledge of “maritime English”. Also in certain ship manoeuvres we noticed that quality of navigation is decreasing. On the Left Bank we are already for months confronted with a ship turned around during loading of Ro-Ro cargo and containers. Two- three years ago a container vessel leaving the terminal on the river Scheldt came into difficulties as a result of a wrong ballasting manoeuvre.

For this a many other reasons we deeply support the actions in raising awareness in order to attract people to the maritime professions. We need to restore between others, the social prestige of seafarers professions. Even, we as a port authority are confronted we a lot of vacancies for people with nautical skills. We are pleased to see that the number of starters in the Nautical College doubled during the last five years so that for the future we could rely further on well trained and experienced officers. The human element is of vital importance in ensuring safe navigation. Well trained professionals are needed both onboard ships and ashore. Without adequate and qualified human resources, shipping will suffer and decline.

Another task is to ensure that shipping takes advantages of the new information and communication technologies and is fully integrated in intelligent logistics systems. We need to give birth to “e-maritime”.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I hope that you will be able to explore not only the port but also the city with its impressive cultural, architectural and economic history. I hope that you will take the opportunity to discover the many beautiful renaissance buildings, pieces of art and other hidden treasures of Antwerp. Apart from its remarkable history, Antwerp is so much alive and offers anything one is looking for. As a matter of fact, being in the heart of the world’s diamond centre, surrounded by some of the famous fashion designers, Antwerp is considered a real shopping paradise!

I wish you a very nice evening, a brilliant continuation of the workshops and a pleasant stay in Antwerp.

Thank you very much!