

UPDATE ON RECOMMENDATIONS OF PREVIOUS COMMITTEES OF INQUIRY ON ACCIDENTS ON THE VOLTA LAKE

The Ministry of Harbours and Railways has over the years been taking actions to address the findings and recommendations of previous committees of inquiries into transport boat accidents on the Volta Lake. In all the following courses of action have so far been taken:

CREATION OF GHANA MARITIME AUTHORITY

In addition to the work of the various committees of inquiry, the Ministry has also been doing its own homework. The findings of Ministry's own investigations and the various committees appointed to investigate accidents on the Volta Lake all point to one thing – lapses in the management of safety on the lake. It was these findings which partly informed Government and the Ministry to set up the Ghana Maritime Authority (GMA). The GMA was set up to provide leadership in maritime matters of which transportation safety on the Volta Lake is part and parcel.

MANAGEMENT OF SAFETY ON THE VOLTA LAKE

A key finding of most of the previous committees of inquiry is the poor management of transportation safety on the lake. As at the time of most of the accidents the management of transportation safety was vested in the Volta River Authority (VRA) by virtue of the Volta River Development (Lake Traffic) Regulations, 1974 (LI 862). The committees noted that the VRA did not live up to expectation in the enforcement of safety on the lake. They observed that the VRA concentrated on its primary function that of electric power generation to the neglect of the duties assigned it by LI 862. They further noted the serious resource constraints of the VRA when it came to transportation safety on the lake.

Government took serious note of these findings and set out to address the situation. The management of transportation safety was completely removed from the VRA and entrusted to the Ghana Maritime Authority. This is evidenced in both the Ghana Maritime Authority Act, 2002 (Act 630) and the Ghana Shipping Act, 2003 (Act 645). The Ghana Maritime Authority with its

vast maritime expertise is best suited to manage safety on the lake. There are plans to better resource the GMA financially to effectively manage safety on the lake.

To further enhance the performance of the Ghana Maritime Authority in this area, a whole division, the Inland Waterways Division, has been created to handle all matters relating to the safety of inland waterways transportation. This division is divided into 3 sections – Surveillance and Patrols; Inspection and Surveys; and Navigational Aids and Services. When the division gets its full complement of officers and is provided with the necessary tools (boats for patrols, inspectors for surveys and lake traffic control units) preventable accidents on the lake should be a thing of the past. Unpreventable accidents will also be better managed when they occur through the provision of better search and rescue services.

As at now the Inland Waterways Division (IWD) is resourced with marine surveyors, who conduct surveys and inspections on inland waterways craft on a regular basis. During a typical survey and inspection, transport boats are marked with maximum load line marks and assigned maximum passenger and cargo carrying capacities. Boats in bad condition are stopped from sailing and given a time limit (deadline) within which to rectify their deficiencies before they are allowed to operate.

The IWD can also co-opt other surveyors of the GMA to assist in boat surveys and should this become necessary and also hire private marine surveyors for boat survey and inspection. Since the various accidents the GMA has surveyed and inspected boats at Yeji, Tapa Abotoase, Dzemeni, Kpando Torkor, Kete Krachi and Dambai. Under the IWD's plan of work for 2007 the remaining boat stations will also be covered.

DRAFT NEW REGULATIONS FOR INLAND WATER TRANSPORTATION

The committees of inquiry noted also quite rightly that the extant law – Volta River Development (Lake Traffic) Regulations, 1974 (LI 862) was outdated and needed revision. The Ministry and the GMA has also taken action on this.

A draft law has been prepared to replace LI 862. The draft regulations are based on the 2002 IMO Model Regulations for Inland Waterways Vessels and Non-Convention Vessels Operating in Africa. They are therefore up to date and comprehensive. The draft law is currently being reviewed to address issues raised at a stakeholders' forum before it is sent to the Attorney-General's department for promulgation.

The draft law prescribes the licensing of boats, the certification of boat operators and boat mechanics and the proper design and construction of boats. With the promulgation of this law a law will also be promulgated to establish Lake Traffic Control Units, who will provide local presence at boat centres and enforce lake safety standards among other things. Officers of the Lake Traffic Control Unit will also carry out surveillance duties and assist in search and rescue activities during boat accidents or other emergencies.

ENFORCEMENT OF SAFETY STANDARDS - NAVAL TASK FORCES

In September 2006 the Ministry in collaboration with the GMA and the Ghana Navy started deploying naval personnel at various boat stations along the Volta Lake to enforce lake safety standards. The first Naval Task Force was deployed at Yeji in the Pru District of the Brong Ahafo Region in September 2006. Since then Naval Task Forces have also been deployed at Tapa Abotoase (Jasikan District), Kete Krachi (Krachi West District) and Dambai (Krachi East District). There are also plans to station Naval Task Forces at Dzemeni (South Dayi District) and Kpando (North Dayi District) later in the year (2007). The emphasis as at now are the busy boat centres where accidents are more frequent. These are also the places where the boats have to travel long distances on the lake before getting to their destinations.

The Naval Task Forces (NTFs) check the loading of boats to prevent overloading and ensure proper loading of boats. They also check drunken and unruly behaviour of boat operators and prevent boat sailings when bad weather is expected and after sunset. In addition, the NTFs have been empowered by the appropriate authority (Directorate of Fisheries) to check illegal fishing activities in the lake, such as the use of bamboo and under-size

mesh nets. In collaboration with the local authorities, the District Assemblies, the NTFs have also organized clean-up campaigns in the communities in which they are based. Under this the inhabitants are made to clean their surroundings and the waterfront on a weekly basis. In the next phase of the exercise patrol boats will be acquired for the NTFs to enable them to patrol the lake for safety breaches and for search and rescue purposes.

The NTFs have brought a lot of discipline into transport boat operations on the lake. This has in turn improved the safety of lake transportation. This is evidenced by the fact that for the first time in many years no boat accidents were recorded during the Easter of 2007. The professional manner in which the job is being carried out by the troops has also ensured that there are no conflict situations, especially with the police and the local authorities. The NTFs, the police and local authorities are cooperating very well; they are working nicely together and complementing each other in their work.

TRAINING AND CERTIFICATION OF BOAT OPERATORS AND MECHANICS

The GMA has concluded arrangements with the Regional Maritime University (RMU) to conduct training courses for boat operators (coxswains) and outboard motor mechanics at 5 boat stations along the Volta Lake. The stations are Yeji, Tapa Abotoase, Dzemeni, Kete Krachi and Kpando-Torkor. The training course has been designed by the RMU and approved by the GMA. It will be run in 3 modules. The first 2 modules are for the boat operators and cover such subjects as boat handling, survival techniques, fire prevention, first aid, stability and safety management. The third module is for the outboard motor mechanics and covers outboard motor operation and maintenance.

Under the programme the RMU lecturers will conduct the training courses and examine participants at the end of the course to ascertain whether they have attained the required competence. Successful candidates will then be issued with certificates of competency by the GMA. Only boat operators and outboard motor mechanics who have taken the training course, passed the

evaluation examination and have been issued with certificates of competency will be allowed to operate boats. The courses will be conducted in the local languages so that no person is disadvantaged. The training courses will later be extended to the other boat stations along the lake.

VOLTA LAKE SAFETY CODE

The GMA as part of its safety awareness creation has produced a Safety Code. The Code provides information and educates boat operators and the travelling public on the lake on lake safety issues. The Code is currently being aired on Unique Radio and Peace FM. A drama version is also available on GTV.

WEATHER FORECASTS

For the first time in the history of lake transportation weather forecasts are being provided to boat operators to enable them to decide whether it is safe to sail or not. This has been made possible through an arrangement between the Ghana Maritime Authority and the Ghana Meteorological Agency. Under the arrangement, the Ghana Maritime Authority provides the fax numbers of the district assemblies with boat stations to the Ghana Meteorological Agency the latter then faxes weather information to the district assemblies as and when necessary. The district assemblies pass the information onto the Naval Task Forces who use it to control boat sailings. Whenever bad weather is expected boats are stopped from sailing. The areas presently enjoying this facility are the areas served by Naval Task Forces (NTFs). There are plans to extend this facility to other boat centres after the appropriate arrangements have been made for the dissemination of the weather information.

LIFE-SAVING APPLIANCES AND SAFETY EQUIPMENT

Life-jackets and other Personal Flotation Devices

One of the key deficiencies on transport boats identified by previous committees of inquiry and recommended for urgent redress is the lack of life-jackets and other personal flotation devices. Government has sought to address the situation. A few years ago the Ministry acquired 1000 lifejackets for distribution to 5 boat stations along the lake as a pilot project. The life-

jackets were to be sold at subsidized prices to boat owners and the travelling public. The idea was to demonstrate the importance of the life-jackets and to encourage their acquisition by boat owners and the travelling public.

Although most people have acknowledged the importance of the lifejackets as being indispensable in saving life, their high cost on the Ghanaian market has made the idea not to catch on. The education process is nevertheless continuing and ways are also being explored to get affordable lifejackets onto the Ghanaian market. The use of other personal flotation devices like lifebuoys and life cushions which are cheaper is also being investigated. Another possibility that is being considered is the acquisition of life-jackets for hiring out for boat trips on the lake at an affordable fee.

Portable Fire Extinguishers

Following intensive education by the GMA and the NTFs on the importance of fire extinguishers and the hard lessons of fatal and near fatal fire incidents on transport boats, boat owners are beginning to yield to the advise to acquire portable fire extinguishers. In at least 2 boat stations, Yeji and Tapa Abotoase, boat owners are acquiring fire extinguishers in earnest of their own volition. In addition to portable fire extinguishers boat owners are also being impressed upon to have on board their vessels boxes of sand with scoops, fire blankets and fire buckets for fire fighting purposes. The education is continuing in earnest to get those boat owners who have not yet acquired fire extinguishers to come on board.

DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION OF BOATS

The GMA is considering the design and construction of boats as a long term solution to the management of safety on the lake. When the draft law that is currently under review is promulgated, the next task of the GMA will be to draw up comprehensive design and construction rules to govern boatbuilding in the country. These rules will set the criteria to be met by boat designs and construction as well as specify the materials of construction and give the scantlings to be used. A project will also be sourced to introduce new boat

designs (prototypes) and train boatbuilding carpenters in modern boat construction techniques.

In the meantime, the problem is being addressed by the GMA requiring all boat plans and drawings to be approved by it before boats are constructed. Marine surveyors are also appointed to supervise the construction of new boats whose plans have been approved. When the construction is completed the boat is made to undergo trials to the satisfaction of the Authority before it is licensed to operate. During boat surveys in the field, marine surveyors also seize the opportunity to educate boat owners on sound boatbuilding methods and boat owners are taught ways of strengthening their boats to improve their safety.

MARKING OF FAIRWAYS

In order to mark fairways on the lake, the numerous tree stumps must first be removed. Plans are far advanced for the Ministry to enter into contractual agreement with a foreign firm to remove the tree stumps in the navigation routes or fairways on the lake. When this is done the lake will next be charted and the fairways marked by buoys to ensure the safety of navigation. The foreign company has already imported a workboat into the country to conduct feasibility studies for the removal of the tree stumps to begin. After the removal of the tree stumps the fairways to all destinations will be marked.