



Gibraltar Maritime Administration

HM Government of Gibraltar

Watergate House
2/8 Casemates Square
Gibraltar

Tel (+350)200 46862 / 200 47771 /200 50424
Fax (+350) 200 47770
e-mail: maritime.survey@gibraltar.gov.gi
maritime.registry@gibraltar.gov.gi

Shipping Information Notice – 076(a) *Supersedes SIN 076*

Recognised distress signals and advertised alternatives to pyrotechnic flares

To: Ship owners, Operators, Managers, DPA's

1. Introduction

1.1 The International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea, 1972 (COLREGS) apply to all vessels at sea. Annex IV of these Regulations lists the signals which should be used if a vessel is in distress and needs immediate assistance. Distress alerting equipment to transmit these signals (e.g. pyrotechnics) must be carried on all seagoing commercial vessels and on most non-seagoing commercial vessels.

1.2 The specific distress alerting equipment which must be carried is prescribed in the carriage requirements for each type of vessel and nature of operation. In each case, a range of equipment is specified to transmit an initial alert, long distance location signal, close range location signal or, in some cases, all three.

1.3 The International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, 1974 (SOLAS) describes the standards that distress alerting equipment should meet but there are also non-SOLAS distress signals on the market. The Gibraltar Maritime Administration (GMA) has no mechanism for assessing the standard of these non-SOLAS signals, whereas SOLAS products are subject to a strict assessment and type approval process, and may be marked with a Wheel Mark. The GMA expects vessel operators to ensure that the distress alerting equipment they buy and carry is compliant with the applicable International Regulations in every respect. *(See Shipping Guidance Notice 093(a))*

2. Background

2.1 The GMA is aware of the development and marketing of hand-held non-pyrotechnic devices offered as alternatives to pyrotechnic flares; these will be referred to in this document as Electronic Visual Distress Signals (EVDS), which covers an array of different devices. While these devices have a number of potential uses, from a practical and search and rescue perspective the light signal they produce is different to that produced by a pyrotechnic flare and may not be recognised as a distress signal. This could have fatal consequences.

3. Gibraltar Policy on Marketed Alternatives to Pyrotechnic Flares

3.1 To be effective, distress signals need to be internationally recognised. Not all EVDS provide a distress signal listed in COLREGS Annex IV (such as SOS), and the GMA knows of no EVDS device which is compliant with the SOLAS technical performance standards for distress alerting equipment. Consequently, the international carriage requirements do not recognise EVDS and the Gibraltar carriage requirements have not been amended to formally recognise them either.

3.2 A change would therefore be needed to Annex IV of the COLREGS or to the SOLAS technical performance standards and to the applicable international/Gibraltar carriage requirements in order to offer these devices full recognition as distress signals. The GMA sees no likely potential of this in the near future because objective evidence of a compelling need for change is yet to emerge.

4. Advice for mariners

4.1 For commercial vessels which are required to carry flares, any hand-held distress flares carried must meet the requirements. *(See Shipping Guidance Notice 093(a)).*

4.2 Where carriage of flares is not mandatory, the GMA nevertheless advises that EVDS should not currently be carried as a substitute for conventional pyrotechnic flares. This is because of the risk that EVDS may not be recognised internationally as a distress signal. However, EVDS may be carried in addition to the required distress signalling equipment and used to identify location or transmit the S-O-S distress signal through a switch mechanism (just as a torch or other light-emitting device could be used). However, the limitations of EVDS devices should be recognised and anyone using them should be made aware of the type and quality of signal being generated.

Steve Gomez – Chief Surveyor (Ag)
For & on behalf of the Maritime Administrator

Issue date: 12 May 2022

All notices are available through www.gibraltarship.com

This copy of the Administrative Instruction has been sent electronically and does not carry a signature or official stamp. A sign and stamped copy will be available upon request