

## **Progress in achieving global interoperability in seafarers' identification**

GENEVA (ILO News) - The International Labour Organization (ILO) announces an important step forward in ensuring the proper functioning of the biometric element of its new "biometric" identity verification system for seafarers. The tests carried out in this regard could also contribute to advances in achieving biometric interoperability in other areas.

The ILO's [Seafarers' Identity Documents Convention, 2003 \(No. 185\)](#) is the first international binding instrument for an international identification system. Its biometric feature, a fingerprint template stored in a barcode, was chosen because this biometric solution was the one preferred by the seafarers themselves. However, the main challenge in systems of this kind is the achievement of global interoperability: i.e., it must be possible for the fingerprint information on the Seafarer Identity Document (SID) issued in one country to be read correctly by equipment used in any other country. To enable this the [ILO Governing Body](#) adopted (in March 2004) a single standard with the specifications to be followed in national systems and products for generating the biometric representation on the SID and for verifying that the seafarer's fingerprint corresponds to the fingerprint on the SID. In November last year, the ILO announced the result of a 6-week test on seven products that had just been carried out on board ship with 126 volunteer seafarers ([Date/Reference of the previous (Nov. 2004) press release]).

This test demonstrated that two of the products from very different sources met the ILO's performance objectives even when working together. The main problem with four of the five other products related to the requirement of global interoperability. Thanks to support from the United States based National Biometric Security Project, a follow-on study was carried out to investigate what had caused the problems in interoperability. Software, designed by the ILO's expert to resolve the interoperability problems, was made available to the suppliers of products tested in 2004 so that they could make any necessary adjustments. This was followed by a second phase of testing on six of those products (including the two that met the ILO requirements), using the data that had been collected during the testing on board ship last year.

The new testing has just been completed. It has shown that the interoperability performance of the previously unsuccessful products has significantly improved, and that one of them can now clearly be considered as effective and as interoperable with each of the two other products that were found last year to meet the ILO's performance objectives.

This achievement not only is welcome news for the ILO and for countries that will be taking part in the system for seafarers' identity documents established by the new Convention, since there is now a choice between three suitable biometric products, from suppliers in three different countries, as well as a good prospect that the information generated by the present tests will enable the products of other suppliers similarly to meet the ILO's performance objectives. But the achievement also has a wider significance with respect to

the ongoing work on biometric identification in general. The testing begun last year has been groundbreaking in the sense that it was the first time a standardized interoperable fingerprint minutiae template has been tested among multiple products from multiple vendors. The results are therefore relevant for other groups around the world which intend to deploy systems based on a biometric template of this kind. It should be stressed that the biometric element in the ILO's standard for the fingerprint template is based on standards adopted, or being prepared, under the auspices of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). The ILO's work – including the recent testing – has considerably benefited from the support of ISO and the advice of its experts in biometrics.

[General information on C185, as in the previous press release]