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Top firms eye Indonesians

MSI Ship Management and VShips are stepping up their interest in recruiting Indonesian seafarers

AS SHIP managers continue to seek new sources of officers and ratings, interest is growing in the training and recruitment of Indonesian seafarers. The country's huge population offers a recruitment pool that could potentially exceed the Philippines.

A number of major cruise lines have a history of employing Indonesian crew in catering and hospitality roles, but so far Indonesia has not achieved its promise. Several ship managers are now stepping up their interest in Indonesia.

MSI Ship Management, part of the IMC group opened a new training centre in Jakarta in February. KK Devanandan, managing director of MSI Marine Services, told LLSM the company hoped gradually to build up its recruitment of Indonesians.

"We are looking for ratings through to senior officers," he explained. "Initially, we are giving English training and training using our own systems then we are putting them on vessels."

"Each class intake will be for 20 people and in three to four years we hope to be crewing up to 20 vessels with Indonesians. We are mixing ratings and junior officers with other nationalities, then eventually we will use all-Indonesian crews."

VShips is also eyeing Indonesia as a possible source. "We already employ some Indonesians on our managed fleet, including officers of all grades, so the skills are there," said Lawrie Campbell, chief executive of VShips Manpower Services.

"We are probably going to open one or two new manning centres in Asia over the next 12 months and we are seriously looking at getting a foothold in Indonesia."

Negative perceptions

One of the reasons why Indonesia has not so far lived up to its potential as a crewing source is a generally negative perception among ship managers. A number of leading ship managers contacted by LLSM admitted they had never seriously considered using Indonesian seafarers and had no intention of doing so.

This is surprising, given that in many respects Indonesia offers many of the advantages found in the Philippines. With more than 17,500 islands across the Indonesian archipelago, the manning of ferries and fishing boats has created a well-es-

ablished pool of potential seafarers, while average wages are among the lowest in Asia.

Yet the BIMCO/ISF Manpower 2005 survey recorded only 7,750 officers and 34,000 ratings from Indonesia, a fraction of the numbers recruited in the Philippines. In comparison with the Philippines, the Indonesian manning and training industry remains underdeveloped.

"Rightly or wrongly, there has been a view in the past that training and certification is not what it should be," said Mr Campbell.

"If we go to Indonesia to use it as a significant resource, we would expect fairly heavy investment in training as clients need to know the skills are up to scratch."

Language, too, was generally considered to be a problem when compared with the Philippines.

But the most common factor cited by managers was 'security', notably the difficulty getting visas for crew to travel to the US and some European countries because of the perceived security risk from Indonesians, a predominantly Muslim country. MSI, for example, will limit its Indonesian crews to intra-Asia trades for this reason.

Mr Campbell said most of VShips' current Indonesian employees were deployed on Asia Pacific trades. "With crewing, you need to get the logistics right and you need to be able to get visas quickly," he said. "My understanding is that part of the reason for slow visa times for Indonesians is the perceived security risk."

Posing greater threat

But there are indications that this is becoming an outdated perception. "If anything, the Philippines and Filipinos are now a higher security threat than Indonesia, where the army has been very successful in targeting fundamentalist groups since the Bali bombings," one Bali-based regional security expert told LLSM.

This confidence was recently punctured, however, by two bomb blasts at leading hotels in the Indonesian capital, Jakarta.

Although no definitive information was available on visa application times for Indonesians at embassies around the world, the relationship

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between Indonesia and the US has improved considerably of late.

The Indonesian government has tackled Islamic fundamentalism, and since President Barack Obama — who spent some of his formative years in Jakarta and speaks Bahasa Indonesian — came to power the US has further acknowledged the benefits of a strong relationship with the world's most populous Muslim nation, a country that also boasts one of Asia's healthiest democracies and fastest growing economies.

The election won in July by incumbent President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono for a second term in office strengthened that relationship further. Martyn Howard, operations and personnel director at Bibby Ship Management, said the perceived political instability of Indonesia had impacted on the ability of crew to gain entry to ports in the US, but perceptions are now changing.

Bibby already has strong recruitment and training links in the Philippines and Mr Howard said the company would consider recruiting crew in Indonesia in the future.

"We are certainly not closed to the idea of recruiting Indonesian crew, but the strength of our existing relationships in other countries means

Security and language were cited by ship managers as the main problems associated with employing Indonesians, compared with Filipino seafarers.

we have no immediate plans to open any recruitment or training facilities in Indonesia."

René Vos, crewing department manager at Kustvaartbedrijf Moerman, told LLSM that securing visas for Indonesians was no longer the chore it once was.

"There were problems in the past after 9/11, but for Schengen [EU] visas and for US visas there is not much of a problem any more," he said.

Some 75% of the Netherlands-based ship manager's total crewing needs are now met by Indonesians. "If you as a company take the time to assist Indonesians in applying for the different visas and provide good employment contracts, it is our experience that there will be no problem at all," he said.

"There are not more, to my opinion, because there is an alternative called the Philippines and because lots of companies think it is more difficult to employ Indonesians than is actually the case."