Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to this High-level Meeting to Address Unsafe Mixed Migration by Sea, designed to facilitate dialogue and promote enhanced cooperation and harmonization between United Nations agencies, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, Governments and the shipping industry.

The issue of mixed migration by sea, including irregular migration, has been a serious concern for decades – if not longer. But, in recent years, it has reached epidemic proportions, to the extent where the whole system for coping with such migrants is being stretched up to, and sometimes beyond, its breaking point. So, today I am going to talk to you about this issue, its global context and some of the things we need to consider if we are to address it properly. I will tell you at the outset that I don't have a solution; but I can tell you about some of the things that I believe need to be done and about IMO's readiness to play its part in what I believe must be a concerted effort.

It is a fact, undisputed and clearly understood, that migration has been part of history since the beginning of mankind. Throughout history, people have fled hunger, war and persecution or moved simply in order to find a better life elsewhere. Migration affects every region of the world, and many countries are now simultaneously countries of origin, destination and transit. History has shown that migrants contribute to economic growth and human development in both home and host countries and can enrich societies by bringing cultural diversity.

But with rights come responsibilities; and it is the responsibility of all those seeking a better life in another country to do so within a proper legal framework – a framework that embraces, for example, national immigration, customs and entry-and-exit procedures. Sadly for all concerned, what we see in the Mediterranean today, and in other parts of the world, is a large increase of irregular migration, in which not only are such procedures completely ignored but huge numbers of people take to the sea in craft that are clearly not fit for the purpose, placing their own lives and those of their rescuers in danger and putting unacceptable strain on those who have to cope with them.

The figures reveal the huge extent of the problem. Clearly this is a humanitarian tragedy. In the Mediterranean alone, more than 200,000 people were rescued and over 3000 people died in unsafe, irregular and illegal sea passages last year. More recently, over the New Year period, the m.v. Blue Sky B and m.v. Ezadeen incidents, where ships full of migrants were abandoned to navigate in congested waters without qualified persons in charge, thus posing a grave threat to the lives of migrants, other seafarers and the marine environment, have again highlighted the need for urgent action. More recently still, reports of dozens of migrants dying of hypothermia, even after having been plucked from the sea by rescue craft, highlight the danger of such sea passages.
So what does all this have to do with IMO? Well, while IMO is not directly concerned with the legalities of migration per se, as the UN agency with responsibility for safety at sea, and for the legal framework surrounding search and rescue and the long-standing obligation of merchant vessels to go to the rescue of people in distress at sea, IMO clearly has a deep interest.

Those of you with long memories may recall the incident involving the Norwegian-flagged container ship **Tampa** in August 2001. The **Tampa** rescued more than 400 asylum seekers in international waters but became embroiled in an international dispute about the eventual place of disembarkation of the persons rescued. While governments argued about where they should be taken, the 400-plus refugees, many housed crudely on the weather deck of a containership designed for a crew of just 27, began to suffer from dehydration, malnutrition and other ailments.

From IMO’s perspective, the principal outcome of that incident was a set of amendments, adopted in 2004, to the SOLAS and SAR Conventions and their associated guidelines, which served to back up the obligation on a ship’s master to render assistance with a corresponding obligation on contracting Governments to coordinate and co-operate in assisting him/her to deliver persons retrieved at sea to a place of safety within a reasonable time; and these obligations apply regardless of the status of the persons in distress at sea, including potentially illegal migrants. More recently, IMO has facilitated a series of meetings with the intention of drawing up a regional instrument to improve the coordination of SAR operations and to facilitate the disembarkation of persons rescued at sea in the Mediterranean region. Also, IMO, UNHCR and the International Chamber of Shipping have revised jointly the guidance in **Rescue at Sea: A guide to principles and practice as applied to refugees and migrants**, which has just been published and is being distributed to shipmasters.

In this context, IMO also welcomes the recently developed Recommended Principles and Guidelines on Human Rights at International Borders recently issued by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. These Guidelines provide clarity with respect to the correct treatment of persons rescued at sea and migrants at points of disembarkation.

Unfortunately, the sheer size and scale of situation we see in Europe today is threatening to jeopardise these humanitarian principles. Coast guards, navies and the rescue infrastructure as a whole are all being stretched to breaking point. They have barely been able to deal with the tidal wave of people needing to be picked up from the sea; and it must never be forgotten that the strenuous efforts they make to rescue the thousands of persons in distress come at the price of great risk to themselves and at considerable cost to their countries.

Italy and Malta, in particular, along with other countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea, have reported severe problems in their ability to cope with the on-shore processing of the large numbers of undocumented migrants who reach their shores. Nonetheless, they continue rendering their services (deeply humanitarian in their very essence) and, in the process, have rescued thousands of such persons – an outcome that has earned them the appreciation of the community as a whole.

But this situation has implications far beyond coast guards and other professional rescuers. Last year, more than 650 merchant ships were diverted from their routes to rescue persons at sea, and a similar number were diverted even though they did not, in the event, participate directly in a rescue operation. The high number of merchant ship diversions has an obvious detrimental impact on the shipping industry, and a knock-on effect on trade, the economy and the global supply chain.

The threats are not just financial. The risk to the safety of seafarers and mixed migrants on board these ships should not be underestimated. Merchant ships generally have small crews and are not configured to carry, feed and care for large numbers of people, many of whom are
desperate, under stress and potentially violent. Ships are inherently dangerous places for those not used to them. Threats of disease, terrorists and criminals will also play on the minds of the seafarers.

These issues are clearly a matter for IMO if they call into question the proper application of international regulations. There is a real concern here that the well-established legal system, which is based on the centuries-old tradition of rescue at sea, is under threat.

The search and rescue system maintained by the shipping community is not designed for rescuing hundreds of thousands of people drifting on hundreds of small, unseaworthy boats left in shipping lanes. We must put our efforts to prevent unsafe and unregulated sea passage arranged by smugglers and we must consider ways to provide safe alternative means of transport for migrants.

It is abundantly clear that what we face here is a huge and multi-faceted problem. It is a problem with social, political, geo-political and economic dimensions.

I firmly believe that there is scope for greater efforts by coastal States of departure to better manage the process of migration and to reduce the numbers of unsafe craft undertaking sea voyages. This could include taking action against smugglers involved in facilitating the travel of migrants by sea on board unseaworthy craft; and the more effective application of measures to enhance maritime safety and security in general. In collaboration with Member States concerned, we must strive to develop a mechanism whereby migration is managed and sustainable and find alternative safe ways so that people are not driven to making dangerous voyages on unsafe craft. However, if some mixed migrants do manage to take to sea, which may be inevitable, then a robust mechanism for rescue should be in place to protect and save lives, and deal with them in a legal, humanitarian and sustainable manner. In this context, I must say that more efforts by all nations surrounding the Mediterranean and the European nations would be highly appreciated.

The solution, must be a collaborative effort, and it must involve all those who can be counted among the potential stakeholders. To this end, I am pleased to note that the Global Migration Group (GMG) has recognized the need for collaboration with institutions beyond the GMG’s constitutive membership with a view to considering a more comprehensive strategy to address the current issue of sea passage of migrants.

IMO stands ready to collaborate and give its support to all those who can play an active part in addressing this dreadful situation; and I am thinking here of the organizations represented here today. We need to work together to develop impact-oriented actions; as an international community, we need to deliver as one.

To this end, and building on the Joint Statement on Protection at Sea in the Twenty-First Century that was agreed during the UN High Commissioner for Refugees’ Dialogue on Protection Challenges, held in Geneva on 10 December 2014, and the on-going work of the Global Migration Group, I very much welcome the decision taken earlier today by those organizations to establish a mechanism to address unsafe mixed migration by sea in our effort to support the Global Migration Group of the United Nations.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you.