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## Forum seeks to clarify Beijing's backing for port

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A recently formed umbrella group for the shipping sector plans to visit the mainland and Taiwan as part of a wider focus on developing Hong Kong's maritime industry, the head of the group said.

So Ping-chi, convenor of the Hong Kong Maritime Forum which represents 23 organisations out of more than 40 maritime-related bodies in the territory, said a visit to Beijing and Shanghai was scheduled for April. The group would 'visit the headquarters of major shipowners' and talk to the Ministry of Transport, Maritime Safety Administration, training institutes, maritime universities and other organisations.

He said the main purpose was to get more details about the 12th five-year plan and how it relates to Hong Kong's shipping sector.

There was just a general reference in the plan that Beijing would support efforts to reinforce and enhance Hong Kong's status as an international centre for shipping, he said.

'There was no substance at all. We want to find out the details and how much support the mainland authorities or the industry can give us,' So said, adding that it was also up to Hong Kong to come up with ideas.

He said the forum was also looking at visiting Taiwan in an effort to 'promote a closer working relationship in greater China' among shipping-related interests. So said Hong Kong shipping companies have close links with several Taiwanese maritime firms. These include Chinese Maritime Transport, a Taipei-listed shipping and logistics group founded by Tung Chao-yung in 1950 after he fled the mainland and who later formed Orient Overseas Container Line in Hong Kong in 1967.

So said the forum, which had its first meeting last week after being inaugurated in mid-December, plans to hold formal and informal meetings at least every three months.

The forum, which includes representatives from ship owners, unions, shipbrokers, insurers, maritime colleges and logistics groups, has formed three task forces to look at specific issues including training and maritime-related policies.

So said maritime training was one of the key areas that needed to be tackled as Hong Kong faced a looming shortage of experienced people in the face of an ageing maritime population. If not addressed this could affect port operations and ship safety.

He said the situation regarding the number of youngsters with seagoing experience was better, largely due to the Marine Department's sea-going training incentive scheme which subsidises people wanting to become ship's officers or engineers. Hong Kong shipowners had also supported the scheme by providing berths on board ships to give the youngsters sea-going experience and training once they qualified.

This would help offset people retiring from the industry.

So said the career path was less well defined for graduates from the Sea School and colleges with maritime-related courses, including Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

He said firms such as marine insurers, ship managers and ship brokers only wanted to employ experienced people. 'Ship managers employ those with a captain's or chief engineer's ticket, but will not take trainees or those with a second mate's ticket,' So said.

He said while there were scholarships and universities ran courses, including at least three higher diploma, degree and masters courses at Polytechnic University, youngsters found it difficult to find a qualification-related job. 'The excuse from companies is they don't offer trainee positions. If there is no career path, how are youngsters going to join the industry?' So asked. About 200 youngsters enrol for the Polytechnic's diploma, undergraduate and post-graduate courses each year.

He said the forum's task force on training planned to match the maritime sector companies that were willing to recruit trainees with training bodies. 'We will start this year and see how it goes,' So said.

Arthur Bowring, managing director of the Hong Kong Shipowners' Association, said: 'He has a point, but I believe that it is more due to the small size of the maritime sector than any reluctance to take young recruits. We have to remember that very few people work in the maritime sector, and although some young recruits are taken

for various openings, there will never be a very large demand.'

One academic said: 'In my experience a substantial proportion of the graduates from the shipping/logistics programmes manage to find relevant jobs in related fields. I have myself recommended a few students to my shipowner friends and I have regularly bumped into graduates who are working in those fields.'