

**The International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue defines the “distress” phase as:**

a situation wherein there is reasonable certainty that a person, a vessel or other craft is threatened by grave and imminent danger and requires immediate assistance (*para. 1.3.13*)

**“Distress” is only one of three phases of a maritime emergency**

- ***Uncertainty phase:*** When a situation is unclear, such as a vessel failing to arrive or report in.
- ***Alert phase:*** Where attempts to contact a missing vessel have failed, or other apprehension regarding the safety of people.
- ***Distress phase:*** When there is reasonable certainty of a grave and imminent danger. (*SAR Convention, para. 4.4*)

## **Distress is not limited to sinking or capsizing**

- Small boats, particularly those commonly used by migrants and refugees, can sink completely within a few minutes.
- Waiting for such boats to take on water before treating the situation as a distress case can place dozens of lives at risk.
- Such boats can be considered in distress if they are unsuited to conditions on the open ocean.

## There are numerous risk factors

- Overcrowding: High risk even in calm seas.
- Dehydration and exposure: Life-threatening even if the vessel is intact
- Low fuel or loss of propulsion: Drifting vessels cannot ensure their own safety.
- Risk of inclement weather beyond what the vessel is designed to navigate

Everyone at sea can play a role in  
preventing shipwrecks

**Do not wait to report or respond before it is too late**

Find more information and resources at

[www.fhas.ch](http://www.fhas.ch)