

**Address of Mr. Pieter van Vollenhoven,  
Chairman of ITSA, The International Transportation Safety Association to  
The International Emergency Management Society,  
May 14 to May 17, 2002, Waterloo, Ontario**

2002-04-29

Mr. Jack Harrald, President,  
The International Emergency Management Society,  
9<sup>th</sup> Annual International Conference,  
University of Waterloo,  
Waterloo, Ontario,  
Canada, N2L 3G1.

Dear Dr. Harrald,

Re.: Independent accident investigation: every citizen's right, society's duty.

Please accept this as a short address to your conference as an indication of our interest in cooperation between our organizations. Unfortunately, other preexisting commitments prevent me from joining your conference; but certainly in spirit I am with you in your deliberations.

Every time a major accident occurs a public demand is heard for an independent investigation into the causes of the accident and to prevent reoccurrence of similar accidents.

I believe that the public has the right to such investigations because such investigations are the only way to establish exactly what happened. They help alleviate public concerns that may have arisen in the aftermath of the accident.

Independent investigations can help victims and their families come to terms with their suffering; they can teach us lessons for the future and they can make our actions transparent. In fact you could say that they help our democracy to function properly.

Parties involved in accident investigation began to realize that inquiries based in criminal law which mainly attempt to find out who was to blame for an accident was not the right instrument to find out just what exactly had happened. If lessons were to be learned for the future and steps were to be taken to prevent the similar accidents from happening again and again, another type of investigation was needed.

It is not a question whether independent investigations are needed, but rather how independent they really are in practice. Governments have come to realize that if they carried out such investigations themselves, they invited criticisms about impartiality and conflicts of interest. Since governmental inspectors are involved in drafting regulations and monitoring compliance, they could be seen as both judge and jury. The only way of stopping this criticism was to set up independent safety boards.

**The International Emergency Management Society**

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Independent investigations can be of great significance to society. Only if the people have the right to them, *and a right that is anchored in law*, can there be a guarantee that truly independent investigations can and will be carried out.

I have been working in this area for over 25 years. I have advocated this concept for modes of the transportation industry. Over the past decade more and more countries are following the example of the grandfather of this development – the National Transportation Safety Board of the USA, founded in 1967.

Recently, after some major disasters in the Netherlands, the concept found its way to other sectors as well such as defense, industry, natural disasters, health and environment and major occurrences involving explosions, fires, collapse of buildings and structures.

In the Netherlands, it now has been recognized that independent investigations can be a valuable tool in general:

- to reveal the causes of an accident,
- to learn from accidents, and
- to restore the public confidence.

It has led to the establishment of a new board in the Netherlands: a Safety Investigation Board for all sectors.

This new board will address safety issues in an integral manner. It will conduct multidisciplinary investigations into all relevant issues, including both the immediate and underlying causes, and the events before, during and after the event. This means we will focus on fire fighting, rescue and emergency aspects as equivalent to accident precursors and causes.

To fulfill its mission, a Safety Board must be legally and functionally independent. A Safety Board does not allocate blame or liability. Its methodology and procedures must therefore be separated from criminal law inquiries and influences of governmental and industrial interests. It has its own methodology and must maintain the highest quality to guarantee its credibility and objectivity.

It therefore also needs the support from other organizations. Safety boards cannot cover all expertise and specialist disciplines in-house. Safety Boards must take part in an information infrastructure and must have experts available on call,

In this respect it is of great importance to be here at the 9<sup>th</sup> Annual TIEMS (The International Emergency Management Society) conference to convey to you the message of the very real importance of independent investigations. It offers both organizations the opportunity to exchange information, to combine efforts, to exchange experiences and findings and to develop a common body of knowledge.

I hope this expression of our interest will be just the first of a series of contacts leading to a fruitful cooperation between our organizations.

Yours sincerely (dictated)

**Mr. Pieter van Vollenhoven, Chairman,  
ITSA, The International Transportation Safety Association.**