

Lives at risk as shippers flout safe container stowage

Maritime and Coastguard Agency says half of all containerised cargoes examined are substandard

Janet Porter

SPOT checks on containers to be shipped from the UK are uncovering a huge number of deficiencies and documentary errors that could threaten the lives of those handling the cargo.

Maritime and Coastguard Agency officials, who are required to conduct random inspections, are reporting a very high failure rate. On average, half of all containerised cargoes examined are found to be substandard in one way or another.

That is an improvement on the 100% failure rate that the MCA was regularly reporting a few years ago, but even now there are occasions when every single container pulled over for a check is non-compliant and unable to proceed with its voyage until the contents have been stowed correctly, accurately weighed, and properly declared.

The alarming statistics, that are likely to be replicated worldwide, emerged during a seminar organised by the southeast branch of the Nautical Institute on the safe stuffing, stowing and securing of cargo transport units on ships. The numbers suggest that little progress has been made over the years in getting the message across to shippers, consignors, forwarders and consolidators about the dangers to which they are exposing others.

"They are gambling with someone else's life," accused Clive Savigar, director of Coleshill Freight Services, as he listed example after example of cargo that had not been properly packed and secured, or correctly documented. Every error could have resulted in injury, or even death, to a truck driver, dockworker, seafarer or receiver who came in close proximity to the container and its contents.

Maersk Line suffers an average of 10 to 15 container units a week that are leaking, of which about five involve hazardous cargoes, revealed John Leach, the company's general manager for global dangerous cargo and special cargo management.

That poses a significant danger, not just to personnel but also to the company

because of the possible disruption to services and clean-up costs.

Ironically, the least risky freight is likely to be hazardous cargo, as long as it has been packed and labelled by a reputable company that knows what to do.

Most worrying for the shipping industry are those who seem to have no understanding of the consequences of their actions. "What I see goes against basic common sense," said Jim Chubb of BMT Marine & Offshore Surveys.

Experts are also shocked by evidence of deliberate misdeclarations of a container's contents, with endless illustrations of fireworks, for example, being described as something seemingly quite harmless such as children's toys.

"Most disturbing is where there is clear intention to deceive," said scientific investigations specialist Chris Foster of JH Burgoyne and Partners. Neither are badly loaded or wrongly-declared cargoes confined to third world countries.

"The problem is much nearer to home," according to Mr Chubb, with such containers as likely to have been packed in the UK as anywhere else.

The size of the problem is difficult to quantify. But with some estimates putting the number of container trips at 200m per annum, even an incident rate of less than 1% would still suggest that up to 2m boxes a year are potentially contravening safety standards.

Yet in the worst case scenario, with a loaded mega-containership written-off, the financial costs would be enormous. Some underwriters put the insured loss at as much as \$2bn.

The TT Club's risk management director Peregrine Storrs-Fox has raised the idea of container lines sharing experiences and compiling a blacklist of offending shippers who repeatedly put their vessels and crew in danger.

Moves are now being taken at international level to improve safety in the carriage of dangerous cargoes, with the International Maritime Organization bringing in mandatory training for shoreside personnel from 2010. But it will be the responsibility of the company in question to determine who is trained, how, and to what level, said the MCA's hazardous goods adviser Keith Bradley. Most doubt whether this will be enough to stamp out bad practices that permeate the container shipping industry and put lives at risk.

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