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Number of containership fires is ‘shocking’

Allianz consultant is concerned that risk is being normalized in the shipping industry.

By Chris Dupin | Jan 8, 2019

The fires onboard the Hapag-Lloyd ship *Yantian Express* off the coast of Nova Scotia and the car carrier *Serenity Ace* in the North Pacific are highlighting what have become frighteningly commonplace occurrences.

[The first week of 2019 brought a spate of serious shipping accidents](#) that has continued this week. On Tuesday a fire and series of explosions on a tanker off of Hong Kong resulted in the death and injury of several crew members. [South China Morning Post reports](#) one crew member died, two are still missing and seven were taken to a hospital when the Vietnam-registered tanker *Aulac Fortune* exploded as it was taking on fuel.

[Insurer TT Club wrote last year](#), “Sources suggest that container fires may occur on a weekly basis and statistics indicate there is a major container cargo fire at sea roughly every 60 days.”

Andrew Kinsey, senior risk consultant at the insurer Allianz Global Corporate & Specialty, which publishes an annual [Safety and Shipping Review](#), said, “It is a truly shocking figure when you look at what a single container on fire can develop into.”

The cause of the fire on the 7,510-TEU *Yantian Express* is unknown, but Hapag-Lloyd said it began on Thursday in a single container and spread to additional containers. The ship was en route to Halifax from the Far East, having transited the Suez Canal.

High winds have made fighting the fire difficult. A salvage tug, *Smit Nicobar*, arrived on Friday, and as the fire spread on the containership, a decision was made to transfer the crew from the ship to the tug on Saturday and Sunday.

Hapag-Lloyd spokesman Tim Siefert told *American Shipper* on Tuesday that the a second tug, *Maersk Mobiliser*, arrived at the *Yantian Express* on Monday and both tugs, which are equipped with water cannons, are now fighting the fire, which is in containers in the forward part of the ship. He said the ship is still 800 miles from Nova Scotia. It is not known how many containers are on fire.

The cause of a fire aboard the 650-foot car carrier *Sincerity Ace* (pictured above) on

New Year's Eve is also unknown. That ship caught fire on Dec. 31. The crew abandoned ship, but only 16 crew members were rescued and five are reported to have died.

[Autoweek reported](#) that the ship contained 3,500 cars, most of which are Nissans. A tug was due to arrive at the scene of the fire on Monday.

Kinsey said he is concerned about "normalization of risk" in the shipping industry. "We accept too much in the maritime environment," he said, pointing to reports about improper stowage of hazardous cargo.

Ian Lennard, president of National Cargo Bureau, said, "In 2017, we inspected more than 31,000 containers and portable tanks. About 4 percent of the containers that we inspected revealed improperly secured hazardous materials inside the containers. Of the 1,721 vessel stow plans we inspected in 2017, 20 percent revealed errors in regard to the IMDG Code and/or the vessel's document of compliance. About 6 percent of all inspections had placarding issues. Some containers had both deficiencies. The overall failure rate was 9 percent."

Kinsey said, "We would never accept that type of error in aviation, but yet in maritime we continue to."

Lennard pointed out that the inspections his company traditionally has done are of containers carrying cargo being exported from the U.S. and are for repeat customers. He expects random inspections would uncover an even bigger problem.

In a customer notice issued on Monday, Maersk said it and other carriers in the industry are working to improve container safety and that the National Cargo Bureau has begun random inspections of inbound containers to the U.S. "to remove some of the risk from mis-declared or incorrectly stuffed containers" under a [program that was announced last summer](#).

Lennard said NCB is inspecting 500 containers under an initiative with Maersk and other members of the Cargo Incident Notification System. "It should be illuminating because it is looking at containers that are not traditionally inspected."

He said a little less than 300 containers have been inspected and expected the initiative to be completed within several months. "We should have some meaningful and probably some shocking numbers when we are done with the 500."

John Verhoeckx, owner of the four-man company Port Supervisor that performs inspections of containers in Rotterdam, told *American Shipper* last year that in 2017 his firm inspected about 4,000 outbound containers or about 15 percent of the outbound containers containing hazardous materials shipped by his company's clients. About 10 percent of those containers were improperly placarded or labeled and 23 percent were rejected because of problems with lashing or securing of cargo. (There was some overlap between the two groups.) His clients include Hapag-Lloyd, ONE and Yang Ming.

Kinsey does not believe there is a need for stricter dangerous goods rules, but said there is a need for better compliance with existing regulations as well as "greater vigilance in inspection and prosecution of people who are not complying."