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## Ship Operators Raise Alarms Over String of Vessel Fires

Companies point to mislabeled, mishandled dangerous goods as likely source of unusual spate of fiery, costly incidents since last year



*A fire caused the Grimaldi Grande America to sink earlier this month off the coast of France, taking cargo that included luxury automobiles to the seafloor. PHOTO: LOIC BERNARDIN/MARINE NATIONALE/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK*

By Costas Paris

- [Biography](#)
- [@CostasParis](#)
- [costas.paris@wsj.com](mailto:costas.paris@wsj.com)

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The international shipping industry is wrestling with a spate of fires aboard vessels at sea in recent months that have crippled several big cargo ships, killed a number of seafarers and cost companies and their customers hundreds of millions of dollars in damages.

The latest blaze came on March 10, when a nearly 31,000-ton combined container and automobile carrier caught fire in the Bay of Biscay off the coast of France, leading to the rescue of 27 crew members by a British Navy frigate. The Grimaldi Lines-operated Grande America sank two days later, taking more than 2,000 cars that included luxury [Audi](#) and Porsche models, to the seafloor.

The disaster was the fourth big ship fire in the past four months, and followed a handful of fires last year that included one that heavily damaged the megaship Maersk Honam, owned by Denmark's A.P. Moller-Maersk A/S, the world's largest container ship operator by capacity, and killed five crew members.

Maersk officials say the string of incidents is likely a coincidence, but it has raised alarms among operators, insurers and shipping customers, and focused more attention on the safe handling of the big quantities of goods that move on increasingly large and packed oceangoing vessels.

"It was a wake-up call," Maersk's head of fleet technology, Ole Graa Jakobsen, said of the fire that broke out March 6, 2018, on the Maersk Honam, a 353-meter (1,158 foot) ship with capacity for 15,000 containers, in the Arabian Sea.

Maersk has since barred the stowage below deck of dangerous goods and other shipments that may be resistant to fire fighting. The cause of the Honam fire, which took five weeks to bring under control, remains under investigation, but Maersk has said the ship carried shipments classified as dangerous goods.

Ship operators, insurers and regulators increasingly are focusing on the chemicals, batteries and other goods that can trigger or feed a fire.

Although the causes of ship fires are difficult to pinpoint, transport and logistics insurer TT Club estimates that around two-thirds of all incidents are the result of “poor practice in the overall packing process” of dangerous goods, which are often misidentified or undeclared.

The insurer said there is a fire at sea every 60 days on average, and overall insurance claims in excess of \$500 million annually. The group estimates some six million containers, or 10% of the overall capacity moved across the oceans, contain dangerous goods, and nearly 1.3 million of those boxes aren’t properly packed or are incorrectly identified.



*The undamaged portion of the Maersk Honam was loaded onto a special cargo transporter and ferried to South Korea, where it will be rebuilt. PHOTO: MAERSK LINE*

The potential damage from such incidents has grown as carriers have moved to ever-larger vessels, concentrating more containers on a smaller number of ships. That can raise the chances that dangerous goods are onboard and the rush to handle many thousands of boxes at port call may raise the chances that poorly packaged dangerous goods can slip through.

Mr. Jakobsen said that in some cases undeclared or misdeclared goods cause containers to go ablaze.

“It’s a root cause of some of the fires and we do what we can in terms of checks to make sure that what is declared, is actually what is in the box,” he said.

Products like barbecue charcoal can burst into flames when the temperature rises and others like fish food and pool-cleaning agents generate oxygen that can intensify the blaze.

The National Cargo Bureau, a surveying body that assists the U.S. Coast Guard to enforce safe navigation, said 4% of 31,000 boxes it checked in 2017 contained dangerous cargo that wasn’t properly secured.

Another survey of 1,700 vessel stowing plans said 20% of the plans weren’t in line with existing dangerous-goods rules.

“The numbers of containers and stow plans we check are very small. So if you extrapolate them for the whole industry, the problem is immense,” said NCB President Ian Lennard.

Some transport officials say shippers who circumvent dangerous-goods rules with false declarations should face criminal penalties. But German container line [Hapag-Lloyd AG](#), which says it gets around 3,000 undeclared or misdeclared bookings a year, believes stricter rules won’t help.

“The shipper who deliberately doesn’t declare what is in a container won’t change because of more legal requirements,” said company spokesman Nils Haupt.

The fire on the Grimaldi Grande America started in a container on the vessel’s deck, according to the company, and spread quickly to vehicles on board, forcing the crew to flee in a single lifeboat.

It followed a string of fires that began on New Year's Eve, when a blaze engulfed the Japan-registered car carrier Sincerity Ace as it hauled 3,500 vehicles from Yokohama to Hawaii. Five crew members died when a lifeboat launch went awry in heavy weather and they ended up in the water.

On Jan. 3, fire broke out on containers aboard Hapag-Lloyd's Yantian Express off Canada's eastern coast, forcing an evacuation of its 22-member crew.

Five days later, the Vietnamese tanker Aulac Fortune was rocked by three explosions off Hong Kong that left one sailor dead. On Jan. 31, a blaze hit the Singapore-registered APL Vancouver off Vietnam that took several days to bring under control before the ship was forced to limp back to Singapore for assessment.

Maersk, meantime, is still coping with the aftermath of the Honam fire a year after it happened.

Salvage crews sliced off the heavily damaged front portion of the ship and the rest of the vessel was loaded on a special extra-large transporter in Dubai last month and ferried to a shipyard in South Korea. Workers there will weld a new 228-meter steel section onto the remaining portion from midship to stern.

**Write to** Costas Paris at [costas.paris@wsj.com](mailto:costas.paris@wsj.com)

#### **Corrections & Amplifications**

A nearly 31,000-ton vessel caught fire on March 10 in the Bay of Biscay, off the coast of France. An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that the vessel caught fire off the eastern coast of France. (March 24, 2019)