

# Covid-19, Ammonium Nitrate and Oil Spill in Mauritius

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The highlights for the year 2020 just like perfect vision reveals the importance of information authenticity and transparency. Vital information on the spread of the virus glaringly showed the weaknesses of how we communicate the truth. This painfully led to devastation to lives and livelihoods of people. Many however are still debating on infringement of privacy with need to provide contact track and trace information of each of our movements. Unquestionably this method has proven to assist in the further spread of the virus. Information was King, or so we thought, until year 2020 proved that information was a question of life or impending death.



Taking this into context with the rise in accidents related to dangerous goods and unseaworthy vessels sailing the oceans; the devastation caused clearly indicates the lack of information transparency.

## Wakeup calls unheeded.

The first 3 months in the year 2019 saw a series of explosions on container ships. The year began with a slew of wakeup calls to the shipping industry with the first quarter reporting the following.

- On Jan. 3, a container on the *Yantian Express* caught fire off Canada's Eastern Seaboard. More than 260 boxes were destroyed.
- On Jan. 29, the *Olga Maersk* was sidelined in Panama after a fire broke out in its engine room.
- On Jan. 31, the *APL Vancouver* was stricken off the coast of Vietnam by a fire that started in a cargo bay.

- On Feb. 13, a fire broke out in containers of charcoal on the *E.R. Kobe* near China. The ship was diverted to Hong Kong to unload the damaged boxes; three more containers caught fire as the ship continued on to Shanghai.
- On Mar. 6, the giant *Maersk Honam* caught fire off of India, killing five crew members. It took five days to get the fire under control.
- On Mar. 10, a container on the combined container/auto carrier *Grande America* caught fire off the coast of France. As the ship became engulfed in flames, crew members evacuated in lifeboats and were later rescued by a British naval vessel. The ship capsized and sank the following day.

Going back further in time shows similar incidences; in 2017 13,800 teu MSC Daniela was on fire for a week off the coast of Sri Lanka. In 2016 CCNI Aranco, a 9000 teu vessel caught fire in Hamburg port. In 2012 MSC Flamina which burned for more than 6 weeks and caused 3 deaths and 70% constructive loss was not a loud enough wake up call as 7 years later MSC Honam, a 323 metre container ship catches fire which takes 5 days to control. This disaster saw the loss of 6 lives and an estimate of more than \$1bil in losses.

The loss of lives and the sudden increase in “general average” was yet an insufficient jolt. Memories being short lived with unaffected parties, trade continued over our oceans moving 90% of global trade with pockets of disasters here and there.

Investigations have shown that most of these fires were a result of either mis-declared or un-declared dangerous goods. The fires were harder to manage with firefighting systems in the Ultra Large Container Ships-ULCS, causing constructive loss. Insurers such as Allianz and the International Union of Marine Insurance (IUMI) have previously warned of safety concerns and are promoting improved ship design and fire-fighting equipment to prevent and extinguish fires on ULCS.

“While fire-fighting systems have developed to ensure the crew are able to ensure their safety, and thereby complying with International Convention for the Safety of Life At Sea (SOLAS) requirements, firefighting capabilities on board have not kept up with the upsizing of container vessels, to ensure the preservation of the vessel itself,” says Chris

Turberville, Head of Marine Hull & Liabilities, UK, AGCS. “This is one of the most significant safety issues on board this type of vessel and there needs to be considerable development to protect container ships in the event of fire.”

“Improved fire-fighting equipment on board ULCS and correct cargo declaration and storage should greatly reduce the risk of fire,” says Volker Dierks, Head of Marine Hull Underwriting, AGCS Central & Eastern Europe.

### **The opera ain’t over till the Fat Lady sings**

The year 2020 brought is an invisible enemy of the world. Countries raced to trace its movements adopting as many technology tools as they could muster. This virus has forced and continues to exert pressure for a new order in the world, transparency and the truth. Battling the spread of the virus and assisting in the livelihoods of the people, governments were put through unimaginable and uncharted acid tests.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> half of 2020 another wakeup call jolts the world. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of July, 2020 a bulk carrier with 4,000 tonnes fuel, MV Wakashio ran aground at Pointe d'Esny, Mauritius, a sanctuary for rare wildlife and also an Internationally gazette wetlands.



The news of this enormous ecological disaster in Mauritius was only known to the community involved in this sector. The bulk carrier leaked hundreds of tons of fuel off the coast of Mauritius as it broke apart. This incident would not have made it on social media had not the Beirut explosion occurred on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August, 2020.

### **Ammonium Nitrate**

Many knew of the disastrous potential of Ammonium Nitrate when the Tianjin explosion occurred on the 12<sup>th</sup> of August, 2015. 173 people lost their lives when a series of

explosions involving dangerous goods stored in warehouse near the Tianjin port exploded. Among the chemicals stored was 800 tonnes of Ammonium nitrate which formed into a mushroom cloud of toxic gases when it ignited. In Beirut the explosion took 180 lives and displaced 600,000 people, and the cause of the devastation was 4000 tonnes of the same chemical. And in the case of Beirut, investigations have pointed to a toxic mixture of a lack of ethics, competencies and corruption across the globe.

The story behind the storage of this volatile chemical in a warehouse close to the port goes back to the ship. MV Rhosus, a Moldovan-flagged ship, was reported to be forced to call the port of Beirut due to mechanical issues and engine problems and some reports have claimed it was because the de facto Russian owner went bankrupt. The ship was owned through a company registered in Panama and over time the charterer lost interest in the goods. The conclusion, it was forgotten.

Many of the incidences above draw a number of conclusions;

1. Are we depending too much on shipper's responsibility to follow international safety guidelines when it comes to dangerous goods?
2. Who is ensuring that they stay responsible?
3. How soon will there be measures taken by international agencies, financial institutions, insurance providers, ship owners, charterers and class societies to address the lack of information transparency?

## Sources

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