

Box weighing problems

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The cantankerous issue made out by the trade on weighing boxes properly is indeed placing marine adventures at more risks than the perils we can live with. The onus to declare the correct weight is on the shipper and SOLAS* calls for Master to be provided with accurate information. As such it is the envious

duty of the Port State* to ensure that accurate box weights are provided to Masters of ships calling at their ports. There are many issues –some unfathomable, but not unsolvable for sure!!

But what happens when mother of all port states –IMO itself, with no enforcing authority but- gives in to the tantrums of the trade that box weights cannot be ascertained beyond a margin of error and systems do not exist to ensure verification and compliance on a global scale. This must be termed as the new peril of the century for shipping. Seafarers interests did take a stand, but in vain, it has turned out to be! (* incidentally, loading sequence on bulkers (not for grain stability) is subject to Port State oversight and is properly enforced in many countries/ports/terminals. So we do have something to go by and hence we should start where and when possible for box trades also.)

Having been on General cargo ships from cadet to Master, discharged shredded scrap from bulker with 7 pairs of (union purchase) derricks, Australian-spliced for MPP gear on first command, sailed on containerships and Ro-Ro, may I express anger, agony and anguish at the sad, dangerous and sorry state we are stowed- in. We were experts in maintaining and operating cargo gear and it invariably was the Mate's domain, till hydraulics started shifting engineering up keep to Cheng.

Having worked Swinging derricks, gun-tackle, 20 and 40T jumbos on maiden voyage as apprentice, Yo-Yos and the like later on, it was imbibed that the weight of the cargo parcel was always critical to the safety of personnel –aboard and ashore, ship, cargo and environment. True, cargo gear started disappearing from ships as their sizes grew and most containerships are gearless unless they are small feeders in local/regional trades. Having to rely on shore gear for handling cargoes, does it mean that mariners can be fobbed off by mis-declared weights? Aren't there systems ashore starting with Dock Safety and Industrial lifting gear practices to ensure safe movements? Perhaps one would have to whistle-blow and sneak to Customs/Tax authorities highlighting revenue losses in trade!!

To understand gravity –yes unintended gravity shift caused by weight- of the problem, let us see what happens when heavy boxes are declared as light to get top stow and light boxes as heavy to get bottom/priority stow –both to avoid shut outs and missed connections. G and M (centre of Gravity and Metacentre) shift closer reducing GM-metacentric height and reducing righting lever when inclined. This has caused ships to heel over and sink with loss of cargo and lives too. Heavy boxes are said to have caused recurrent cracks/fractures of strength members and a recent splitting into two and unsalvageable total loss of a large sized old container ship also. Boxes have fallen off by

the dozen at exposed anchorages in not so good weather due to poor securing and even due to stiffness and tenderness of stability.

Near escapes aplenty! Thanks to the heeling tanks; or else tragedies would have been more whilst sequencing to suit terminals and double stack trains, with ships listing quite a bit and boxes getting stuck in the slot-guides! Masters are said to have watched the rolling period at terminals –as to when to stop loading fearing low GM. They have found ships down by head (before it became popular as a fuel saving idea) on completion of loading, though she should have had stern trim as per laden outputs of the planner. Horror stories are not worth print, but there have been terrible ones. Forget, restowing, almost impossible and never done to avoid extra costs.

Well, how was wrong declaration issues solved with IMDG stuffed boxes causing spillage, fires and explosions on ships, terminals, ports and on the roads too? Despite there being strict declaration, packing, segregation measures and rules encompassing the whole trade!! One major transshipment port in Asia and its terminals are be credited with enforcing strict measures -by fining and returning such dangerous boxes. The trade did come around folding its tails!

Can it be done with weights also? Yes, if there is a will, there will be many ways. A reputed terminal with turn over above a million boxes for the last five years or so, has pilot-tested weighing by Rubber tyred lifters when taking delivery of export boxes at CY (so as not to lose time while lifting/loading, when more than a box is lifted, upsetting programmed gantries etc). The result is said to be reliable with less than a tonne error, with no time loss and gaining acceptance by the trade.

Don't mistake weight with contents: said to be, contain, count, weigh (plus the old if found, to be delivered' annotation for tally disputes) insertions in B/L that the trade and Clubs are happy to live with (mainly for accepting lesser liabilities by not being privy to more awareness of cargo through description, but!), especially the much-saving 'inherent vice' coming to rescue oftener!!

Amongst shipper, packer/stuffer, forwarder, trucker, trailer-drawer-haulier, weigh-bridges, Customs, terminal, planner, line and crane operators, isn't everything known and transparent, with only Mate and Master kept out of the loop? The poor Master, though rightfully can jettison/sacrifice when in peril, under General Average to save the common adventure! But pray, how would he do that with dangerous and heavy stuff that cannot be accessed or moved an inch or mm?!

In the technologically developed world, it is but impossible not to know the weight of the box even if one does not want to know or record. The trail of records would suffice to verify and remove errors. Then why is the trade: the whole lot: from manufacturers, warehouse, logistics players, transporters et al want to pass the risk on to ships and mariners? This is nothing but organised crime. Yes indeed tells a barrister that in fact almost all trade practices are not genuine, bending and breaking rules to suit themselves at everyone else's risk and costs, from transfer pricing to switch B/Ls!

Blaming the lesser developed countries is not fair indeed. For, the multimodal boxes gets lifted (and inadvertently weighed/recorded) at every transfer –with EIR- during its intermodal transfers. It is not a box's tare weight issue or excess weight accrued due to packing and regulatory compliances. It is just bad practices and the might of the trade, when FAK is the freighting norm, laden with whatever.

One international terminal operator is said to have perfected pioneering and brand differentiating efforts to have the boxes weighed and brought to the notice of the concerned, imposing extra costs and charges on the wrong ones; but the line is said to have the option of shut out still! Would they?

Is it because of the wide ranging insurance available with the sea leg of carriage of goods that the risk is passed on, borne and literally carried by the carriers? No, none would rather address! Under law of tort, one and all could be held responsible for passing the buck and putting others at risk, for negligence with a professional adjective. We need only one such case by seafarers or longshoremen to straighten out the matter. Won't be long before one works its way through the maze of courts!

Not to worry. 'Carrier' is going to be redefined by Rotterdam Rules once it is in force and then we would have easier ways of claim adjustments in the logistics chain hopefully ushering 'safe' changes. Meantime the call is on the professionals and their communities to lobby and get the weight matter sorted out before more ships, cargoes and seafarers come to grief.