

CARGO DECLARATION: must be chased
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It is high time that proper declaration of cargoes is enforced in the whole spectrum of multimodal transportation intermodally connected from hinterlands by trucking, railroading, barging etc with shipping too. For, the problem is literally carried forward to the ships to bear the burden and carry; claims and liabilities too when they happen to occur.

The shipper indeed is the right party to know what the cargo is: its trade and chemical name as applicable, as also weight –whichever way it is calculated/estimated including packing, lashing material etc, viz VGM of SOLAS. For it is the ships, crews, other cargoes and environment that is placed at risk through incorrect and intentional misdeclarations, for various reasons including not to miss connectivities, obtain preferential treatment, good stowage, lower FAK freight etc etc.

Bulk cargoes shifting with flow moisture content has been a recurring problem –starting with grain on general cargo ships- even with tests, procedures etc, especially when minerals are left in the open to rain and snow prior to loading. The oil and gas cargoes seem to be the only exception that are compliant mainly because of the special ships built for them: dirty or clean. But when it comes to chemicals, they do open pandora’s boxes, despite IMDG, its revisions/frequent updating etc.

The problems surface on box ships with vague declarations viz: said to contain, to be , to weigh, to count etc that has been trade practice for quite a while. Recent responsibilities thrust upon carriers to claim GA - exercising due diligence, joint ship+shore management under ISM, onus of having to bring claims under exceptions available under COGSA even for cargoes with ‘inherent vice’ etc are calling for ensuring proper correct declaration in good time before planning-stacking ashore.

Considering the recent fires on large container ships with heavy claims and the call by cargo insurers wanting to get involved in salvage, it is unacceptable –from seafarers and administrators (Flag State, PSC) points of views- that any cargo can be loaded any haphazard way despite the existing provisions and conventions. Clearly enforcement, random checking, supervision etc are found to be lacking, all sacrificed at altars of expediency and cost. How to and at what stage to enforce are pertinent! Since trucking rules are much stricter, how they land up in terminals and aboard are apt questions.

As major carriers like Maersk set out to enforce, one hopes that such strict compliance supervisory measures will trickle down to cheap freight chasing quantity, but not quality/safety. It is practically impossible for carriers to check cargo weight, quality, their declaration and veracity given the very old/existing practices and time available for loading. As such the current system leaves it on cargo interests to declare correctly, as more awareness and knowledge would entail more responsibilities on carriers including liabilities that may arise, negligence –of other cargo interests- not excluded.

As for correct declaration of laden weight in boxes, it is another matter altogether but critical. It is easily compliable in today's world of digitalisation. Even if the commodity is sold or freighted in units other than weight, viz: numbers or volume, mass/weight has sanctity for vessel capacity vis-a-vis load line. True, container ships seldom if at all ever load down to their (load)lines (perhaps feeders in heavy box trades do)even with gross/tare weight of all boxes in all slots –laden/empty, as averaged weights in the box trade tend to be lower than weight/box ratio.

The issue is one of stability, stress and safety. In most long haul container trades, stability may not be a problem, but it is in short sea and feeder trades. Stability –the self-sustaining ability of vessels to stay within positive stability range –when rolling, avoiding synchronised (with the waves/swell) rolling that could cause capsizing- by returning to stable equilibrium reacting to external forces pushing her, is critical for safety.

With bigger, longer ships, stress has become very critical. Stresses are created all along the length and breadth (more of torsion by twisting the vessel) of the vessel due to weight distribution exceeding natural buoyancy support as vessel floats, especially in heavy seas, pitching, yawing, slamming, pounding etc. These can cause sheer forces along the length of the vessel causing cracks and eventual breaking off. Ships indeed have, towed to ports under salvage, some parts rejoined or reconstructed even.

As such, given the risks, costs and what not, it is high time that declaring correct weight of laden boxes and monitoring it enroute –to avoid misuse of services- are enforced strictly. The weight is definitely known on stuffing and so should be recorded digitally for monitoring during transit by whichever modes to the container terminal. This would ensure compliance of rail and road weight restrictions too. The loaded box weights should be verified at entry to terminals –that is usually the customs compliance requirement- to ensure correct taxation records.

Before/at the time of stacking in the terminals' stow slots allocated for the vessels, weights should be transmitted/conveyed to the planners so that structural safety is not risked. This is a must, as those aboard have very little opportunity to get involved in stow plan from safety or operational points of concern, be it load, fire risk, compatibility, IMDG, heavy or special boxes etc.

As such the onus is on the administrators to enforce compliance by digitalising the monitoring that will serve all intents and purposes in one go. Delay-reluctance on this issue remains unpardonable and it is the bounden duty of all involved to create and comply with such safety mechanisms.