

25 November 2013

China – misdeclared charcoal products

A container vessel covered by Gard recently suffered a fire most likely caused by self-heating of a charcoal product declared as “tablets for water pipes”.

The incident

The vessel was on a liner service between Chinese ports and Africa and was anchored off an African port awaiting the availability of a discharge berth when smoke was detected coming from one of the vessel’s cargo holds. The Master quickly established that there was a fire inside the cargo hold and that the smoke was becoming too thick for the crew to enter the hold. Instead, CO₂ was released into the hold from the vessel’s fixed fire extinguishing plant and the crew performed continuous boundary cooling with fire hoses. There was still evidence of combustion taking place inside the hold after release of the CO₂, but thankfully the port authority allowed the vessel to berth so that deck containers could be discharged in order to ease fire fighters’ access to the affected hold.



In the meantime, the cargo manifest had been scrutinised by the vessel’s agent and suspicion pointed to a container containing “tablets for water pipes” which also had the word “charcoal” in its packing declaration. When the emergency team and port fire brigade finally managed to get the situation under control and were able to access the cargo hold, it was clear that the source of the fire was the container containing the cargo described above. The remaining undamaged cargo in the container was later determined to be charcoal tablets in foil packaging.

Fortunately, this incident occurred at a time when the vessel could receive immediate assistance from shore, minimising the overall damage. If the vessel had been underway in open seas when the fire started, the consequences could have been catastrophic for the vessel and its crew.¹

Recommendations

Members and clients are advised to take the necessary precautions when shippers declare cargoes with product names similar to “tablets for water pipes”. The real nature of the product shipped may be “charcoal”, requiring the cargo to be declared and handled as dangerous goods class 4.2 “*substances liable to spontaneous combustion*” in accordance with the IMDG Code (ref. UN No.1361 and 1362).

The Gard News article “[Carriage of dangerous cargo - Questions to ask before you say yes](#)” (GN197/2010) is also recommended for further reading. The article summarises some of the main questions to be asked before agreeing to carry dangerous cargoes, perhaps starting with the most important question: *Who is shipping?*²

Only when the vessel’s crew know the type of cargo they are asked to carry, and the dangers and hazards posed by it, can it be stowed and segregated in a manner that will enable the crew to manage its particular risks. Dealing with an unknown product on fire below deck, as was the case in the incident described above, is an altogether different challenge from dealing with a deck fire involving a known product.

We would like to thank Gard’s correspondent P&I Associates (Pty) Ltd in South Africa for their assistance in the preparation of this alert.

¹ Gard is also aware of a similar incident having taken place earlier this year involving another vessel that had loaded “tablets for water pipes” from the same Chinese shipper. In this case, the container had apparently been discharged and was awaiting collection at the shore terminal when the fire broke out.

² The Gard News articles “[Facing the challenge of fire at sea](#)” (GN175/2004) and “[Carriage of charcoal in containers](#)” (GN151/1998) may also be of interest.

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