



Gard Alert: Fire risk associated with Charcoal loaded at Walvis Bay, Namibia

A cargo of bagged Charcoal loaded in several containers at Walvis Bay, Namibia ignited during carriage; the first such incident reported involving charcoal loaded in Namibia.

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Gard's South African correspondents have reported a recent fire incident on board a container vessel carrying several containers of charcoal originating from Walvis Bay, Namibia. The fire broke out while the vessel was underway to the discharge port. The vessel was carrying containers stuffed with Charcoal in bags. Prior to loading, the cargo documents presented to the master stated that the cargo had passed the UN test criteria for self-heating and the cargo was described as “non- hazardous”.



The fire started some 12 hours after departure from the load port when smoke was observed coming from one of the containers loaded with Charcoal. The fire quickly spread to adjacent containers that were stuffed with the same cargo. The onboard fire-fighting team contained the fire as the containers were loaded on the main deck. However, the vessel had to divert to the nearest port for refuge in order to discharge the affected containers.

According to our correspondents, this was the first reported fire incident associated with Namibian Charcoal. The South African Maritime Safety Authority (SAMSA) has also confirmed that they have no prior reports of such incidents involving this type of cargo. Under the IMDG code Charcoal (UN. Nos 1361 & 1362) is a Class 4.2 substance liable to spontaneous combustion. The Code states “*Liable to heat slowly and ignite spontaneously in air*” and “*should have been sufficiently heat-treated and should be cooled down to ambient temperature before packing*”.

Recommendations

- Vessels calling Walvis Bay to load Charcoal in containers should require evidence that it has been properly sampled and tested such that it is safe for carriage under the IMDG Code.
- There is currently little information on this very recent incident. Whilst the IMDG Code does not stipulate deck carriage for Charcoal, it does require stowage that is “Protected from sources of heat” and to “Keep as cool as reasonably practicable”. It is recommended therefore that containers containing charcoal should be stowed on the weather deck with easy access to the ship’s fire-fighting equipment.
- Regular safety patrols should be carried out by the crew to check for any signs of combustion inside containers loaded with the cargo. It is also recommended to check the surface temperature of the containers for any signs of heating due to spontaneous combustion.
- In case of any incidents, masters should immediately mobilise the ship’s fire-fighting team to contain the fire and as appropriate seek shore assistance.

We would like to thank Gard’s correspondents, [P&I Associates \(Pty\) Limited, Durban](#) , for their prompt assistance in preparation of this Alert.