

## **Port Profile: Douala, Cameroon**

### **The Security Issue**

Formerly **pirate attacks** in the Gulf of Guinea always occurred at high sea beyond Cameroon waters. However, since March 2019, two cases of piracy (involving three vessels) conducted by Nigerian gangs have been recorded at Douala anchorage (pilot station) and several crewmembers have been abducted. The situation is becoming alarming and Cameroon's authorities have been under pressure to increase security patrols in this area.

**In the light of the recent attacks, to avoid the administrative delays required to complete an application for government armed guards on board, the Cameroon Government has exceptionally ordered the presence of three armed forces guards on board each vessel at Douala anchorage. So currently, armed guards are automatically supplied on board for ship security at anchorage on a free of charge basis.**

In the past, the presence of armed guards on board had to be authorized by the Ministry of Defence and the Presidency of the Republic. Vessels requiring the presence of armed guards on board were obliged to mandate their agent to complete the formalities. The process was slow with the result that vessels rarely had the time to complete it.

Douala Port traffic Control VHF CH 16 can be contacted 24/24 to report any problems.

The risk of pirate attacks also remains in the Voluntary Reporting Area (VRA) off Nigeria where the Marine Domain Awareness for Trade – Gulf of Guinea (MDAT-GoG) can be contacted at [watchkeepers@mdat-gog.or](mailto:watchkeepers@mdat-gog.or) for assistance.

**Security alongside** is generally satisfactory. Police attend each vessel and private unarmed guards can also be supplied by agents if approved by the port authorities.

Of course, even with Police rounds and security guards, it is not always possible to avoid minor cases of robbery and/or the presence of stowaways on board.



*Cameroon*

**Cameroon** is essentially a politically and socially stable country.

The current troubles faced in the far northern region are an extension of the conflict with the Nigerian Islamist organization called “Boko Haram”.

Also, there are armed separatists in the two English-speaking regions of South-West and North-West Cameroon. The separatists are claiming secession for a new country to be called Ambazonia. The conflict almost three years ago as a result of socio-economic protests in October 2016.

Separatist leaders have since been jailed but the crisis has still not been contained in the field where the Cameroon army is fighting with the armed separatists. This of course results in collateral incidents against civilians. Civilian activities are almost at a standstill (even schools are closed) with regular ghost towns decreed by the separatists. Clearly, these regions are not safe for foreigners/tourists.

Cameroon's Authorities are working hard to sort out the situation.

### **Douala Port Infrastructure and Activity**



*Port of Douala*

**Grounding** in the channel is a recurrent issue which fortunately does not usually have any major consequences for the ship's hull as the river bottom is sandy and muddy.

Indeed, Douala port is not properly/regularly dredged. The official river draft is therefore not accurate enough to assist ship movements.

Several cases of grounding are usually recorded every year and refloating operations can be long and costly.

**The berths** at Douala port are more than 40 years old but are globally safe.

However, the fenders fitted alongside berths are partly missing and/or damaged in places to various extents leaving some steel constructions hanging out into the berth where they may damage the hull of any vessel using the berth.

Despite the poor condition of the berths, many vessels mooring day by day do not suffer any damage.

Berth no. 51 where tankers usually berth has recently been rebuilt.

Berth no. 52 is a specialized berth used by a cement plant for vessels discharging clinker and gypsum in bulk by using grabs. This cargo usually spills out from the grabs during discharge and then falls into the river water resulting in an accumulation of spilled cargo in the water. The berth's underwater profile then becomes triangular rather than an inverted L shape. Due to a lack of any regular dredging of berth 52, the depth of the water in this area is therefore reduced by the accumulation of cargo underwater. This can give rise to grounding incidents, especially during low water.

Berths are often **congested**, forcing the vessels to stay at anchorage for long periods (2 to 3 weeks).



*Douala traffic jams*

Even the port warehouses are congested. Cargo is therefore delivered under tackle causing delays in operations and slow discharge rates as trucks tasked with collecting discharged cargo are caught in heavy traffic, first on shore and then in town.

A berthed vessel may be shifted back to anchorage several times by the harbour master to try to contain the congestion in port.

### **Disputes with Authorities**

Most of the disputes encountered with the authorities (Customs, PSC, MARPOL...) relate to a lack of original paper documents on board (e.g. last port's clearance, H&M insurance certificate or P&I certificate of entry). The Authorities do not accept electronic documents but only paper originals signed and stamped in the classic manner, or true copies signed by the issuer.

Also, as a river port, Douala is a protected environment, vessels without a holding tank or with an unreliable holding tank and sewage plant must produce a

laboratory certificate of sewage water analysis showing the following maximum levels:

Ships built prior to 2010: Resolutions MEPC.2 (VI) dd 03 DECEMBER 1976 apply with the following rates:

1. Fecal Coliforms: 250 mg/100 L
2. Suspended solids: 40 to 50 mg/L
3. BOD5: max 50 mg/L

Ships built from 2010: Resolutions MEPC.2 159 (55) apply with the following rates

1. Fecal Coliforms: 100 mg/100 L
2. Suspended solids: max 35 mg/L
3. BOD5: max 25 mg/L

Ships which do not meet the above parameters may be subjected to a fine for pollution which is officially very high (USD 100,000 to be duplicated in some cases) and possible prison sentences for their Masters.

### **Cargo issues**

Local stevedores do not always carry out their work very professionally when discharging cargoes such as cement, rice, sugar, salt, fertilizer, wheat.



Also, local receivers and even their cargo underwriters usually claim by extrapolation while cargo operations are far from being completed.

As a result, alleged shortages and damage may be very high or overstated giving rise to large claims being directed unfairly against the ships' interests.

The latter should therefore not hesitate (independently of the charterers' arrangements) to appoint a surveyor to act on their behalf with a view to avoiding, challenging or mitigating cargo claims.

## **Stowaways**

Many people stow away on vessels calling in Douala port in the hope of reaching developed countries for a better life. The risk cannot be fully avoided but just limited as stowaways are usually determined people who will resort to any means no matter what the risks to embark.

The vessel's crew must, as far as possible, involve itself in monitoring access on board as well as arranging searches as much as possible.

Landing foreign stowaways embarked at previous ports is possible in order to repatriate them to their country after the required formalities whose costs vary according to the case.

## **Ebola Update**

Cameroon is Ebola virus free.

As a result of the 2014-16 outbreak in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, Cameroon introduced a 21-day period of quarantine at anchorage by health authorities for ships coming from Ebola affected countries.

In principle, the quarantine runs from the date the ship departed from an Ebola-affected country. However, due to the congestion of berths, at the end of the quarantine period, the vessel may be forced to wait more days at the anchorage before berthing.

Launches are arranged by ship agents to allow health authorities to meet the vessel. The costs for hiring launches and sundries are charged to the vessel.

Information provided by Suzanne Moume, Budd Cameroon  
suzanne.moume@budd-pni.com