



Ship Type: All Trade Area: Colombia

Bulletin 327 - 10/03 - Further Cases of Drug Smuggling - Colombia

Further to LP Bulletin 142 that gave details of drug smuggling on ships loading in Santa Marta, Colombia we have recently been advised of a further case involving a ship that loaded at Covenas, Colombia for Yabucoa, Puerto Rico.

On berthing in Yabucoa, permission was given by the master for the US Customs and DEA agents to conduct an underwater inspection for concealed narcotics. On commencing the inspection the agents proceeded directly to the access manhole in the rudder trunk, which lead to the transom space, and reported finding five packets of a suspected narcotic, wrapped in black waterproof layering and attached by magnets to the framework of the transom space.

Enquiries were made concerning checks carried out prior to departing Covenas, including proof of drug searches by ship's staff (checklists & log entries). The master also handed over copies of the underwater inspection made by the Colombian Navy prior to departure Covenas. This inspection yielded no results.

The ship was then boarded by a US Customs canine squad who conducted an extensive inspection that resulted in no further traces of narcotics. In addition, US Customs staff boarded to check and photograph other means of access to the transom space from within ship (via the steering flat). It was obvious that the manhole(s) had not been opened in quite some time, and this fact was not disputed by Customs.

The local agent then boarded the ship with the port clearance and a Customs Notice of Penalty. The ship was cleared to sail without delay, once discharge was completed. However US Customs levied a large fine on the ship "for failure to manifest narcotics" - estimated at US\$ 1000/- per ounce. Since approx 50 kgs of narcotics were found, the fine was set at USD\$ 4,576,000. The Notice of Penalty issued to the master for this sum stated, "If there are extenuating circumstances, you have the right to object to the above action. The limit for payment or filing petition for relief is 60 days from the date of this notice". The DEA and Customs authorities accepted that the ship's staff were in no way responsible for the stowage or carriage of the narcotics, but the assessed fine is standard procedure.

We advise all Members to be particularly vigilant whilst in Colombian ports – and indeed any ports where drugs are known to be smuggled. Thorough drug searches should be carried out prior to departure and if manholes are opened during such inspections they should be sealed on the completion of the inspections. All such actions should be logged in the relevant ship records.

Source of information: Loss Prevention Department