



Colombia – Drug Smuggling

The Club has recently experienced two attempts by drug smugglers to place illegal substances aboard entered vessels in Colombian ports.

On the first occasion a capesize bulk carrier was loading coal at Puerto Drummond. Acting on intelligence reports, the Colombian authorities carried out a detailed search both above and below the waterline and found 250 packages of cocaine hidden inside the rudder compartment.

The second case involved a container vessel working cargo at a river berth in Barranquilla. Terminal security observed a small boat dropping two packages into the water nearby. The police boarded the vessel shortly afterwards and discovered two bags of cocaine underneath a damaged manhole cover inside one of the cargo holds. A mobile phone and rubber gloves were subsequently found by the crew and handed over to the police.

Similar incidents include a vessel which loaded coal in Puerto Nuevo. The ship was searched when it arrived in the United Kingdom and a large quantity of cocaine was found inside the rudder compartment. On another occasion a vessel bound for Europe was searched before sailing from Puerto Drummond and three suitcases of cocaine were recovered from the engine room.

The Colombian authorities are very alert to this issue and frequently search vessels both on board and underwater in response to intelligence reports. At some ports and terminals an underwater inspection of the hull is mandatory, particularly at facilities specialising in oil or coal. Vessels calling at other terminals may request such a search. All underwater inspections are conducted by the Colombian Navy or by private divers and are carried out at the shipowner's expense.

Members with vessels proceeding to Colombian ports are advised to ensure that action is taken to reduce the possibility



of drugs being placed on board. To minimise the likelihood of such an incident, the following preventative measures may be considered:

- Advise the Master and crew that vessels calling at Colombian ports are exposed to an increased risk of drug smuggling, emphasising the need for extra vigilance at all times whilst at anchor or alongside.
- Instruct the crew that suspect packages and suspicious behaviour by third parties (eg visitors, stevedores, contractors, shore personnel) should be reported immediately to the Master.
- Alert all personnel to the possibility that drug smugglers may attempt to befriend crewmembers in the hope of persuading them to hide drugs on board, either for financial gain or as a favour. Such attempts may be made while alongside or during trips ashore. Crewmembers should be reminded of the harsh penalties that drug smugglers face if convicted.
- A common place for hiding drugs is inside the rudder compartment. To minimise this risk a substantial grating or barrier may be fitted to prevent entry from the water, ensuring that the steelwork will remain clear of the rudder stock over its full range of movement. Ideally such fittings should be



welded in place. The arrangements should be inspected periodically to ensure that they remain intact as there have been occasions where determined drug smugglers have used a hacksaw to cut through the metal bars to gain access.

- If it is possible to enter the rudder compartment from the engine room, the relevant authorities (eg anti-narcotics police) should be invited to witness the removal of the manhole cover in order to inspect and photograph the inside, replacing and sealing the manhole cover thereafter. However, this should not be done if the authorities are not available or refuse to attend. In such circumstances the manhole cover should be left untouched as signs that the bolts were recently removed may cause the authorities to conclude that any drugs found inside the rudder compartment before sailing were hidden there by the crew.
- Place additional lighting over the side to illuminate the surrounding water and the quayside at night, particularly around the stern. Regular checks over the side may also be carried out using the Aldis lamp as a searchlight. All deck lighting should remain switched on throughout the night.
- Maintain a strict watch on the accommodation ladder. Only persons with valid reasons for boarding should be granted access. The gangway watchman should be alert to anyone bringing bags or packages on board and should check what they contain.
- Consider the use of private security guards who may be instructed to patrol the vessel's decks continuously, report any signs of suspicious activity, keep a close eye on small craft and fishing boats operating in the near vicinity, watch out for unauthorised divers and air bubbles rising to the surface and monitor the vessel's stern area to ensure that no one tries to gain access to the rudder compartment. The use of a launch may also be helpful in this respect.
- Arrange an underwater inspection prior to departure. The divers should be instructed to pay particular attention to the bilge keels, sea chests, tunnel thruster gratings, sacrificial anodes and the inside of the rudder compartment. The local P&I correspondent should be able to provide details of companies offering such services.
- Search the vessel thoroughly before sailing in accordance with the Ship Security Plan.
- Maintain written evidence of all the above.

If it is suspected that illegal substances may be hidden on board or if a search reveals the presence of drugs, the local authorities, owners/managers, port agents and the local P&I correspondent should be contacted immediately. Photographs and/or video recordings of the drugs may be taken to show how they were found, but nothing should be touched. The area should be sealed off and guarded until the authorities arrive.

If drugs are found on board a vessel in a Colombian port, the local prosecutor's office will almost certainly launch a criminal investigation. In addition, the port authority may decide to check the vessel's security arrangements to determine whether they fulfilled the applicable requirements of the ISPS Code. The vessel will not be permitted to sail until the investigation has been completed which may take several days. However, long delays may be expected if the authorities suspect that crewmembers were involved.

Members requiring further guidance should contact the [Loss Prevention department](#).