

BIGGER SHIPS, MORE CONTAINERS: AN EMERGING HAZARD

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Abstract – Practitioner’s Talk

The fire and sinking of the X-Press Pearl container ship off the coast of Sri Lanka triggered significant sea and shore pollution and, at the least, a local environmental disaster. X-Press Pearl was a relatively small container ship, holding just less than 1,500 containers. This compares to the Ever Given, which, when grounded in the Suez Canal, had about 18,000 containers on board.

Five factors make an X-Press Pearl type disaster a significant emerging hazard: (1) Growth in the size of container ships, with a single container fire able to impact thousands of containers, (2) Fire hazard management on container ships which is not well adapted to container fires, (3) Mis-declared container contents, which can mean that highly hazardous containers are not known to a ship’s crew, (4) Not-in-my-Port risk management, preventing the discharged of dangerous containers, and (5) A gap in response capacities, where dealing with container ship fires is significantly different from dealing with oil spills and other forms of pollution.

The Practitioner’s Talk explores these issues and identifies four actions to reduce the threat of this emerging hazard: (1) Improve accuracy of container documentation, (2) Address container ship fire-fighting abilities, (3) Rethink how ship fires are managed, and (4) Establish formal institutional and operational capacities to deal with container fires, ship fires and resulting pollution. Unless these actions are taken, there is a significant risk of extremely large container ship fires causing significant economic losses and environmental damage.

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