Stowaways - Prevention Guidance

The Master is responsible for all the persons on board and renders the Owner liable for all related costs incurred - including guards to prevent stowaways from landing, secure accommodation ashore and onward repatriation. Frequently, Port States impose heavy fines just for the presence of stowaways on board ships in their waters. Stowaway cases can be protracted, complicated and expensive, quite apart from the burden that is placed on the Master and ship’s crew dealing with stowaways onboard prior to repatriation. The following prevention measures provide guidance to Masters and crews on measures they can implement, to mitigate the likelihood of stowaways boarding their vessel:

- Agents’ warnings to their principals regarding the probability of stowaways in their ports must be communicated to Masters.
- Prior to entering such a port the Master should ensure that all doors and hatchways are securely fastened, locked and, if necessary and not needed for regular access, welded shut.
- When a vessel is anchored in a port or country with a known stowaway problem, lookouts should be increased and a close radar watch maintained to ensure the early detection of the approach of small vessels.
- At anchor, ensure that hawse pipe covers are fitted and secured at all times when the anchor cable is not being heaved or paid out. If he hawse pipe covers are lifted, the anchor washes can be left running to prevent persons climbing the anchor cable.
- At anchor floodlights should be set up so as to illuminate the area surrounding the vessel and in part, the offside of the vessel should be lighted, so that approaches by unauthorised boats can be detected as early as possible.
- Pilot ladders, once their use is complete, should be recovered onboard and stowed. They should not be left over the side unattended.
- An accommodation ladder or gangway needs to be manned by the duty watchkeeping rating at all times whilst alongside to ensure that unwanted persons do not board the vessel. If the watch officer needs to leave the gangway/accommodation ladder and cannot be relieved by another crew member, the gangway/accommodation ladder should, if possible, be left clear of the wharf to prevent unauthorised persons boarding.
- Lockers, stores and entrances that are not required for accommodation access or cargo operations should be kept locked. Accommodation superstructure access should be limited to one or two doors. The remaining doors should be locked from the inside using suitable means to ensure that they can be easily opened from the inside in the event of an emergency.
- Vent trunkings and other voids in which a person could conceal themselves should be made inaccessible by use of wire mesh, grills or steel bars welded/tinned across the entrance.
- Where necessary local watchmen should be employed to supplement the vessels crew and periodic random dock patrols mounted whilst at anchor or alongside in port.
- The vigilance and actions of the crew as they go about the routine of looking and locking will serve as an important visual sign, and these actions may well deter potential stowaways.
- On completion of loading of each cargo compartment the space should be diligently searched, and when the search is completed the compartment sealed and locked. Thus the main areas of the ship can be searched and declared free from stowaways prior to the ship sailing.
- On completion of cargo operations and the disembarkation of all shore-based personnel the ship must be searched again. The ship’s crew should be split into three, four or five search teams, depending on the number of crew available, and each party led by a responsible officer with sufficient knowledge of his search area. The teams should search all areas of the ship simultaneously until they have satisfied themselves that there are no stowaways in their sections. At completion of the search all compartments must be re-secured and the keys should be delivered to the Master.
- In ports of high risk, consideration should be given to anchoring in some convenient position outside the port and making a final stowaway search after the tugs and pilots depart. Any stowaways found in this final search can then be discharged directly to the shore authorities, potentially minimising costs that might otherwise be incurred if stowaways were to be discovered later.
- Once the voyage has commenced Masters are limited in their ability to deviate from the intended voyage. Should a Master feel he has grounds for deviation, he must obtain Owner’s express permission before doing so and the Club should also be consulted.

Information on recent stowaway cases can be found on the IMO website in the circulars section under FAL 2 (Reports on Stowaway Incidents) and can be used by Masters in evaluating the stowaway risk associated with a particular port.

Guidance on handling stowaway cases, including stowaway questionnaires is also available on the free to download Team Effort App (available from the App Store and Google Play).

Article by Neil Gibbons

Correspondent and Communications Manager