

Container vessels ill-equipped to deal with cargo fires



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Fire-fighting systems on many container vessels are decades out of date and incapable of protecting valuable cargos, delegates at the International Union of Marine Insurance's (IUMI) annual conference heard.

Despite the development of much larger ships in recent years, many cargo fires can only be realistically tackled with external support from ocean going fire tugs.



Uwe-Peter Schieder, of the German Insurance Association GDV, called on the industry to promote the installation of more modern and effective fire-fighting systems.

Speaking at the IUMI conference in London he said: "Fire protection systems have not yet realised that cargo is now transported in containers, as it has been for the last 30 or 40 years. Crews do not have the systems to fight fire.

"Hull insurers just have to stand by and pay out the claims."

Mr Schieder stated that the fire which took hold on the MSC Flaminia in 2012 took five and a half weeks to eventually extinguish.

He described how the positioning of containers on such a vessel tends to 'protect' a fire as it develops and block any water being poured on from a fire-fighting tug. Indeed, spraying water onto containers around the source of a fire only cools them down, making them more stable and extending their protection for the fire to develop unchecked.

More advanced onboard fire-fighting systems have been developed including CO2 flooding of holds and remote control monitors that can send up walls of water, partitioning off any blazes above deck.

But few vessels operating around the globe have been fitted with such systems and adding them retrospectively to older ships is difficult and expensive.

Mr Schieder said he was aware of five cargo fires on container vessels already during 2013 and hoped to see more ships better equipped to deal with such incidents in years to come.

"We cannot just continue to ignore the issue," he declared.