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Cyclone Hamish unleashes unfortunate forces

Dale Crisp in Melbourne

Last week, as readers will now surely have seen, Swire Shipping's Pacific Adventurer had the misfortune to be caught up in the Tropical Cyclone Hamish off the Queensland coast. At about 0300 on 11 March, when sailing from Newcastle to Brisbane on a normal voyage on Swire's Australia-South East Asia service, the ship apparently encountered particularly heavy conditions about seven nautical miles east of Cape Moreton.

In the darkness and chaos of high seas and gale-force winds Pacific Adventurer lost 31 containers overboard, at least some of which struck the ship and pierced the hull and two fuel tanks. The 20-foot containers were full of ammonium nitrate, the chemical fertiliser also used in the manufacture of mining explosives. About three tonnes of the chemical also spilled on deck.

As if all this wasn't unfortunate enough, circumstances conspired to progressively worsen the situation as the week went on.

Initially Pacific Adventurer, for which fears were for some time held, was able to take a pilot and be brought to an inner anchorage at Shark Spit in Moreton Bay at about 1200hrs. At this stage the master and crew were only aware of one hull puncture and it was estimated that about 30 tonnes of bunkers had been lost, measurements having been taken in very trying circumstances. "The crew has transferred all oil from the damaged tank to other tanks and no further oil is spilling," Swire said.

The ship was brought up to Brisbane's Fisherman Islands container berths at 0835 the following morning (Thursday) where the remaining 19 containers of ammonium nitrate were discharged and that spilled on deck cleaned up. Meanwhile, oil had started to come ashore on Moreton Island and later on some Sunshine Coast beaches – highly sensitive areas in ecological and tourist terms.

The next turn for the worse took place when Pacific Adventurer was moved upriver to the now largely-disused Hamilton Wharves for a more thorough inspection prior to possible on-the-spot repairs. As I understand the situation the ship was purposely listed to examine what was found to be a 15cm x 15cm tear in the hull on the port side. Unfortunately – that word again – when Pacific Adventurer was righted, more oil was found in the water and divers then discovered a much larger gash, one metre long and 30cm wide, in the starboard hull below the waterline.

As it was Swire had been gradually increasing its estimates of the amount of fuel lost. The first revision last Friday was to 42.5 tonnes, then quickly to 'substantially more'; after the divers' report. By Sunday night the state government was claiming the total spill was probably 300 tonnes and the accusations were flying, forcing Swire to issue a detailed rebuttal.

"Swire categorically denies accusations reported in the media that the owners and master of the MV Pacific Adventurer had lied about the amount of fuel lost from the vessel," it said.

"Swire reaffirms that it accepts its responsibilities in connection with the incident and continues to cooperate fully with the authorities. The master and other members of the crew will stay on the vessel in Brisbane for as long as required by authorities and will be available to assist with their investigation.

"The hull of Pacific Adventurer was punctured when containers were lost over the side while rolling heavily in seas associated with Tropical Cyclone Hamish off Cape Moreton in the early hours of Tuesday 10 March.

"At all times the master and officers of the ship and its owners have supplied the authorities with the best information available. This includes best estimates of fuel lost from the ship and remaining on board.

"The ship's officers had to measure in very difficult conditions the amount of fuel that had leaked from the vessel after the incident. This measurement was subsequently found to be reasonably consistent with those that were later made by both the ship's officers and the authorities when the vessel was brought alongside in Brisbane.

"What both the ship's officers and the authorities were unaware of was that, as well as the hole in the port side that had been identified at the time of the incident, there was a second hole below the water line in a

fuel tank on the starboard side. This hole had allowed some, but not all, of the fuel in the starboard tank to escape before the vessel had entered Moreton Bay. This second hole was not discovered until after the vessel was alongside Hamilton Wharf in the Brisbane River and the vessel was being righted under the guidance of the authorities, at which time a small amount of further fuel escaped from the tank, which was promptly contained and cleaned up.”

But by then the whole situation had a momentum of its own because the biggest problem for Swire was not the incident itself but the fact that it occurred in the middle of the Queensland election campaign. Inevitably the ship, its master, the owners and the spill instantly became political fodder. From its first statement on the matter Swire emphasised its full co-operation with authorities, and later more explicitly said the company and its insurers would meet all their responsibilities.

But of course this was largely ignored by media and politicians looking for someone to blame. The State Opposition condemned the speed and competence of the government’s response to the spill, and the government itself, after a reasonably measured start, then ran for cover – understandably, I guess – as the size of the spill became apparent.

As this column was being written certain inevitable developments were occurring as ‘bad publicity’ overwhelmed the authorities: the master had his passport confiscated and he and the Pacific Adventurer crew were confined to the ship, which was itself formally detained; Maritime Safety Queensland, AMSA and the Australian Transport Safety Board all launched inquiries; and Swire and the master were threatened with fines of A\$2 million and A\$200,000 respectively, plus prospective clean-up and compensation cost of *up to A\$250 million*.

I’ll reserve a review of the media, community and political understanding of the whole situation for another day, along with an evaluation of the company’s response. As always there are lessons to be learnt by the shipping industry, especially about the difficulty of explaining matters we take for granted to a largely – and often *wilfully* – ignorant audience.

But suffice to say I saw no publicly-expressed concern about any possible injuries to or the overall safety of the crew: it was all about oil, oil, oil, seabirds and turtles, and who could be held liable. This would be the ‘worst environmental disaster ever to hit Queensland’, various people asserted, an indication of the perspective being applied. One critic demanded to know why the ship was permitted to be at sea in a cyclone in the first place.

As things stand, the election is being held this weekend and Pacific Adventurer could well find itself also ‘held liable’ for a change of government!