Alert regarding reefer container incidents

Introduction and background
Gard has been informed about a potential safety issue which concerns reefer containers. It is reported that the cooling systems of a number of containers may have been contaminated, that is, replaced with the wrong refrigerating gas. As a consequence of contaminated gas systems, explosions in the compressor systems of a small number of containers have been reported, causing fatalities and injuries to personnel handling the containers. It is reported that these explosions have all occurred on the quayside and not onboard. The risk of explosion is only believed to develop when the container units are in operation and as such, empty containers should not pose a safety threat as they are not active.

Based on the information made available to Gard, it appears that a common factor in the incidents reported to date may be the supply of refrigerant gas to reefers serviced in Vietnam in 2011.

Experience within Gard
None of Gard’s Members and Clients have to date reported similar incidents related to their insurance covers with Gard and to our knowledge, no definitive cause of the incidents has yet been determined by the involved parties.

Gard recognizes that the situation at hand may affect many of our Members and Clients, this could in particular have serious consequences for personal safety. We are also aware that many liner operators, terminal interests and reefer container system manufacturers have already implemented a number of precautionary safety measures in order to control and manage the situation in the best possible way to avoid further incidents from occurring.

The purpose of this alert is primarily therefore to ensure that all our Members and Clients are informed about a potential safety issue concerning reefer containers and to also provide some general recommendations and advice in the hope of preventing further incidents from occurring.

Recommendations and advice
Based on the current information made available to Gard, Members and Clients involved in the carriage of reefer containers should consider the following:

- Gain a better understanding of the problem and how to address it by contacting other container liner operators, reefer leasing companies and reefer container system manufacturers.
- Identify reefer containers that may be at risk. Take steps to safely manage the risks involved, which may involve taking steps to have the relevant containers immediately moved to an isolated place for inspection and/or to prevent access to the vicinity of containers until they can be moved. The need for a risk assessment should be considered in each case.
- Contact the relevant authorities who have imposed their own control measures1 and/or contact your local agents for the latest information on local requirements2.
- For containers with cargo inside, contractual carriers should be mindful of exposure to cargo claims if reefer systems have to be shut down and/or container seals broken and/or if there is a need for cross-stuffing. Consideration should be given to joint cargo inspections with cargo interests, customs and health authorities. Gard has previous experience of reefer container cargoes being rejected by import health authorities due to cross-stuffing health/sanitary procedures not being followed.

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1 The UK Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) has issued a Marine Information Note (MIN 418 (M)) offering advice regarding the reefer container incidents.

2 Early reports from the US suggest that steps have been taken by some longshoremen unions and port labour-management groups to have certain precautionary measures imposed and which may affect any reefer containers that have been in Vietnam in 2011, whether or not they were serviced or recharged there.