

LP 08/2025 Key Takeaways for Ship Stowaway Cases Handling

Stowaways discovered after departure create complex challenges including identity verification, health/safety issues, and repatriation logistics. Immediate reporting to authorities is essential to minimize port delays and penalties. Recent cases highlight critical handling considerations.

I. General procedures

1. Report stowaways immediately to the company and secure them in safe places.
2. Conduct full vessel searches for additional stowaways. Interview the detected stowaways and record them with photographs/ videos.
3. Report stowaway details (numbers, nationalities, the next port of call, ETA) with the company and P&I Club before arrival.
4. The P&I Club will consult local correspondents to determine disembarkation feasibility, required documents, and costs.
5. The correspondents/ agents will get approval for disembarkation from the port/ immigration authority.
6. Repatriation of the stowaways with crew assistance.

II. Case review

Before berthing at Owendo Port in Gabon, a stowaway hiding in a lifeboat was found during a routine inspection on the bulk carrier. The crew found a photo of the stowaway's ID on his phone, showing that he was Cameroonian.

Upon learning of the member's report, the Association arranged a local correspondent to assist with the stowaway's disembarkation and repatriation, and to notify relevant Gabonese authorities and apply for disembarkation permission. A second ship-wide search confirmed there was only one stowaway.

The correspondent informed the member of Gabonese regulations. The member prepaid estimated costs and awaited permission. As the stowaway was a repeat offender, the authorities contacted the Cameroonian embassy. Permission was issued 7 days after the application.

During this period, the stowaway got emotional, ascended the main deck, and tried to jump into the sea several times. After the stowaway was escorted off, the ship resumed its voyage. The member's repatriation responsibility ended as the authorities resorted to criminal penalties.

III. Key lessons

In this case, the crew quickly obtained the stowaway's ID, which facilitated communication between Gabonese and Cameroonian authorities, sped up the disembarkation approval, and reduced port delay.

Thanks to the member's cooperation and the correspondent's assistance, the member was fined 4 million West African CFA francs (about USD\$ 6,500), less than the maximum fines 6 million (about USD\$ 9,800).

The stowaway's attempts to jump into the sea brought handling pressure. Members should be aware of stowaways' unpredictable behaviours, stay vigilant, and supervise them to avoid escalation.

IV. Advice to Members

Members should take note of the following for preventing and reducing losses caused by African stowaways:

1. Strengthen port security: Consult local agents, hire onshore security if needed, retrieve ropes/ ladders, and install rat guards. Refer to the Association's relevant circulars and articles.
2. Enhance on-board anti-stowaway measures: Increase patrols, equip with flashlights, improve mast lighting, conduct pre-departure search, use sniffer dogs, and verify dock workers' details.
3. Record details of where and when the stowaway is detected, the stowaway's physical condition, personal belongings, identity, and family info. Check for contraband (weapons, drugs, etc.) or IDs that are being destroyed.
4. Record the stowaway's boarding port and method, preserve evidence if stowed with cargoes for subsequent claims.
5. Handle stowaways on board: Transfer to a locked room, separate multiple stowaways. Notify relevant parties for agent intervention.
6. Question the stowaways: Check documents, provide info to the correspondents, and draft a protest. Take pictures, assess health conditions, and verify their statements.
7. Manage stowaways: No work assignment, no unauthorized exit. Prevent injuries/ illness and reduce crew-stowaway contact.
8. Record humanitarian treatment and stowaway's state to avoid extortion or slander.

V. Conclusion

For voyages to Africa, strengthen anti-stowaway inspections before departure and arrival. Generally, if a stowaway is found before departure, it is relatively easier to hand the stowaway over to the shore authorities, and there is no need to take the responsibility for repatriating the stowaway.

If a stowaway is found on board, please contact the Association immediately. Instruct the crew and the ship's agent to cooperate with the Association's correspondents. Apply to the authorities for permission to escort the stowaway off the ship and try to complete the stowaway's disembarkation before the ship departs to avoid any delay.

For more information, please contact Managers of the Association.