

Report warns on ability to handle ULC casualties

German investigators highlight shortage of capacity to offload containers

➔ Worrying questions about the ability to deal with an accident involving an ultra-large containership (ULC) have been raised in an investigation into the grounding of the 19,100TEU CSCL Indian Ocean in the river Elbe earlier this year.

The 187,541gt China Shipping Container Lines vessel spent six days aground before 12 tugs towed it to safety on the third attempt. A report by the German accident investigation board BSU says the incident highlights the need for work to enhance the capability for responding to ULC emergencies.

Investigators pointed out that CSCL Indian Ocean was freed without the need to reduce draught by offloading containers. But, the report warns, 'Should this be necessary in a similar case, it must be remembered that in Europe there is currently only one floating crane available that has the reach necessary to discharge containers from this above-average height.'

The Hong Kong-flagged vessel grounded on a sandbank on 3 February while approaching the port of Hamburg with two pilots onboard. 'An alarm sounded on the bridge at about 2210,' the report notes. 'This could not be attributed to anything to begin with. Shortly afterwards, it became clear that the helm had stopped responding.'

A crew member ran to the steering gear compartment and managed to restart the system, with the helm responding again at 2215. However, despite attempts



It took three attempts and 12 tugs to free the 19,100TEU CSCL Indian Ocean in the Elbe Picture: Havariekommando

to manoeuvre out of trouble, the ship ran aground at 2220.

Up to six tugs spent almost an hour unsuccessfully trying to haul the ship back into the fairway before the tide turned. A second attempt involving seven tugs was made on the next high tide, but it also proved unsuccessful.

A detailed salvage plan was then drawn up, which included the removal of ballast and bunkers and the closure of the Elbe to all ships for four hours while 12 tugs finally freed CSCL Indian Ocean.

Investigations revealed that the accident occurred after the Safematic system — which is designed to maintain steering

capability in the event of an emergency such as an oil leak or a burst pipe — was activated.

Subsequent checks revealed that the system had been incorrectly installed, with the faulty switching of two valves meaning that two hydraulic cylinders were operating at the same time, both pressing on the rudderstock and preventing the rudder from turning.

The BSU was unable to determine why the system had activated, as there was no oil leak or any evidence of user error. 'Neither the incorrect wiring nor the random activation of the float switch alone would have caused the helm failure, but only the

combination of such errors,' the report points out.

The report recommends that the IMO should examine whether the SOLAS Convention should require modern steering systems to have a separate error log to enable better analysis of incidents.

The BSU commended the pilots for doing all they could to ground the ship in a controlled manner and also praised the work of the local vessel traffic services to minimise the impact of the grounding. The report also notes that a review has been launched to consider whether large ships should be required to test 'certain engine manoeuvres' before entering the Elbe.