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# Safety of Nigeria’s water ways

Written by -

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Recently, the Nigerian Association of Master Mariners (NAMM) held an interactive session in Lagos, to draw government’s attention to the need for safety on Nigeria’s water ways. The session, which drew stakeholders in the maritime industry, was informed by the increasing cases of marine accidents especially at the Lagos pilotage district. Presently, records show that within the last four months, five accidents occurred due to poor navigational facilities at the ports. Accidents recorded of recent include that which involved a container carrier, which ran aground in December last year due to poor pilotage services. Also in February this year, there was the report of a collision between MV Ionia Wind and Sea Express, both container carriers at the fairway buoy in Lagos. All these were attributed to congestion and lack of adequate lighting system at the ports.

Indeed, with over 300 vessels presently waiting off shore outside the Lagos ports, there is the likelihood of experiencing more accidents during navigation, if the authorities concerned failed to take urgent measures at the ports. This might have informed the recent decision by the Nigerian Ports Authority to re- route ship movement into the Lagos ports.

As the President of the Association of Master Mariners, Captain Adejimi Abu rightly pointed out, the situation is quite worrisome. ‘To us, in this association, it is becoming embarrassing, as we report and receive calls from organisations outside this shore on the seeming absence of a system to administer, monitor and investigate these mishaps. If these trends were to be allowed to continue, it would not be long before our ports are declared unsafe and ship owners will have no option but to divert their vessels to ports of neighbouring countries. The embarrassment to this country and the economic losses are better imagined.”

It is against this backdrop that we share the concern of the Association and call for urgent action, on the part of government, over the state of affairs at the Lagos water ways. Apart from the problem of inadequate facilities, Lagos ports are also considered amongst the most notorious in the world. Criminal activities of sea pirates continue unabated, thus making life difficult for fishermen and vessel owners. Last week, pirates reportedly attacked a fishing trawler, Star 1, killing a Captain and inflicting injuries on several crew members. No fewer than 10 Captains were said to have been killed due to the activities of pirates in recent times.

The situation has also prompted warnings from the Nigerian Trawlers Owners Association that the business of commercial fishing is on the verge of collapse. Reports say that the trend has made it impossible for seafarers to make any fishing voyage for fear of attack on the high sea. This is more worrisome because the trend may likely compound the existing scarcity of fish in the country. Recently at the Argungu Fishing festival in Kebbi state, President Umaru Yar’adua told the nation that \$700m worth of fish is being imported annually. Therefore if pirates are allowed to continue with their criminal activities, this fish import bill will surely rise.

With these facts at our finger tips, government must place emphasis on safety and ensure that our ports operate in line with international standards. The International Maritime Organisation (IMO) always lays emphasis on safety of vessels and where there is none, it calls for sanctions. Therefore, to guard against having our water ways blacklisted, certain things must be put in order. These include the need to critically examine all vessels sailing on the nation’s water ways, a review of the rules and regulations that govern shipping operations, training and re-training of existing safety administrators, early off-loading of vessels as well as the provision of modern working equipment at the ports. It is only by so doing that we can guarantee the safety of the nation’s water ways.

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