

Summary

A ship carrying 20,000 tons of ammonium nitrate, the same substance that caused the 2020 Beirut explosion, has arrived at the port of Abidjan on January 6. This amount is seven times greater than the quantity involved in the Beirut incident. Concerns have been raised about the condition of the reportedly damaged cargo. Authorities have implemented safety measures, keeping the ship in the outer harbor for a thorough examination. Potential risks include a catastrophic explosion, health hazards, as well as environmental, social, and economic consequences.

Recent events and developments

The vessel carrying the same substance that caused over 220 deaths, 6,500 injuries and vast destruction in Beirut has arrived at the port of Abidjan on Monday. Its position was confirmed early this morning using ship tracking websites. The amount of ammonium nitrate on the ship is seven times greater than the one that exploded in Beirut. 3,000 tons of the chemical are due to be unloaded. Certain stakeholders have expressed concerns regarding the condition of the cargo, which has allegedly suffered damage during transportation. While ammonium nitrate is a product commonly used in agriculture as a fertilizer, it can present risks if mishandled or stored improperly. The ship's arrival has also drawn significant attention and stirred concern among the general population, further fuelled by the spread of alarming rumours. Additionally, it was earlier reported that the cargo had been contaminated while on another ship due to a fuel leak. Once ammonium nitrate is contaminated it becomes increasingly dangerous. The contaminated fertilizer has reportedly been disposed of overboard, however, the incident points to the volatility of the substance and has rendered critics continuously more suspicious of the so-called "bomb ship". Authorities in Abidjan stated they have implemented measures to ensure safety. As such, the ship is to remain in the outer harbor until a thorough examination will be completed. Residents have been advised to remain calm and refrain from sharing unverified information to avoid unnecessary panic.

Impact assessment

As clearly evidenced by the 2020 Beirut explosion, ammonium nitrate is a particularly hazardous cargo. Given previous incidents, the risk of a catastrophic explosion is present and exacerbated by the uncertainty regarding the cargo's condition and its tumultuous journey which involved weathering a storm and being turned away from multiple ports due to safety concerns. Such a scenario is sure to have devastating consequences, resulting in destruction, damage to infrastructure, and a large number of deaths and injuries. The much larger quantity of ammonium nitrate compared to that in Beirut is almost certain to also result in a significantly higher impact and more casualties in the event of ignition. Aside from being potentially explosive, once unstable the chemical can also release large amounts of toxic gases and fine particles into the air, posing a serious threat to human health. Additionally, an accidental release of ammonium nitrate could cause severe environmental damage, including the contamination of local water sources. For local residents this is a particularly sensitive topic as many still recall the 2006 Probo Koala disaster in which a ship's toxic waste, initially rejected in Amsterdam, was improperly disposed of across Abidjan and 18 other sites. Over 500 cubic meters of hazardous substances caused the deaths of 17 people and poisoned thousands. A potential new incident could have significant social and economic repercussions. Public distrust of authorities may deepen if the situation is not handled transparently and effectively. Economic activities at the port could be disrupted, affecting trade and livelihoods.

Advice from Forth Global

- Continuously monitor the situation in and around the port of Abidjan.
- For organizations active in and around the port, closely monitor the situation of the Barbados-flagged Zimrida ship and its cargo.
- Take precautionary measures to remain safely indoors for an extended period, if circumstances require, and update emergency and evacuation plans for a worst-case scenario.

Customized advice

Please contact us for specific advice:

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