

LOSS PREVENTION GUIDANCE

Advise to Shipowners on Measures to Prevent Narcotics Smuggling at Ports in Nigeria

1. Introduction:

- As a coastal nation, Nigeria depends heavily on the maritime industry for international trade in import/export and for its neighboring land-locked nations. The ports have the important function of facilitating the transshipment of cargo from water to land and vice versa. Any impediment to this facility for any reason portends enormous loss to the nation's economy.¹ Reported statistics in 2015 by the Nigeria Ports Authority ("NPA"), show that Nigerian ports are the nation's second-largest source of revenue, after the petroleum industry. Consequently, Nigeria's ports' growth and development are essential to the country's overall development.²

2. The threat posed by the smuggling of Illegal Narcotics in West Africa

- Piracy and the smuggling of illegal narcotics pose significant risk for shipowners and maritime operators as well as law enforcement agencies in West Africa. Ship Universe reports in 2025 that the Gulf of Guinea piracy risk level is one of the highest in the world, and that the risks include armed boarding, hostage taking, cargo theft and drug smuggling.³ A BBC investigation/report released in February 2025 states that many illegal narcotics are manufactured in India, and smuggled into Nigeria and some other West African countries

¹ Osadume, C.R., Okene, A., Uzoma, B., & Enaruna, D. (2023). An evaluation of the delay factors in Nigeria's seaports: A study of the apapa port complex. *Journal of Transportation and Logistics*, 8(2), 191-204. <https://doi.org/10.26650/JTL.2023.1203871> @ <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/2769608>

² *AKSU Journal of Administration and Corporate Governance, Volume 3 Number 3, November 2023*; Port Reforms and Concession: A Study of Apapa and Tin Can Island Seaports: Umoh Gabriel Tonyudoh

³ <https://www.shipuniverse.com/navigating-piracy-2025-guide-for-shipowners/#:~:text=From%20identifying%20piracy%20hotspots%20to%20employing%20advanced%20security,mitigation%20costs%2C%20and%20recommended%20defenses%20across%20various%20regions.>

through seaports.⁴ The 2019 world drug report issued by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reports that “...over half of significant seizures of cocaine (55%) over the period of 2013–2017 were related to trafficking at sea.”⁵

- Appropriately, there has been a significant crackdown from Nigerian law enforcement agencies on smuggling. They have reported a significant number of arrests at Nigerian ports and have doubled down on their efforts to eradicate the menace. The Nigerian government and its agencies continue to develop ways to meet the significant challenges posed by the miscreants involved in the illegal businesses, while providing safety measures to ship owners, operators and stakeholders in the maritime industry.⁶

3. What is a narcotic drug?

- “‘Narcotic Drug’ means any of the substances, natural or synthetic in the First schedule of the single convention of Narcotic Drug 1961 and the Convention as amended by the 1972 protocol amending the single convention on Narcotic Drugs, as amended in the second schedule to this Act including the United Nations convention Against illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substance 1989.”⁷ The comprehensive list in the First schedule of the single convention of Narcotic Drug 1961 has been revised and updated.⁸

“Maritime drug trafficking refers to the illegal transportation and distribution of illicit drugs via sea routes. It is a subset of global drug trafficking, specifically focusing on

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/articles/cq5zepjlx2eo>

⁵ <https://www.standard-club.com/knowledge-news/article-drug-smuggling-preventative-measures-1452/>

⁶ <https://punchng.com/opioid-smuggling-expose-nafdac-ndlea-react-to-bbc-investigation/>

⁷ Section 52, National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA)

⁸ https://www.unodc.org/pdf/convention_1961_en.pdf

the exploitation of maritime spaces, including oceans, seas, rivers, and ports, for the smuggling of drugs. This form of trafficking is particularly challenging due to the vastness of international waters, the high volume of global maritime trade, and the difficulties law enforcement agencies face in monitoring and securing such expansive areas.”⁹

4. Which government agencies are responsible for the Prevention of Narcotics Smuggling at Ports in Nigeria?

(i) The Nigerian Maritime and Safety Administration Agency (“NIMASA”)

The Nigerian Maritime and Safety Administration Agency (NIMASA) established by the Nigeria Maritime and Safety Administration Act 2007¹⁰ is the primary agency responsible for the safety and administration of maritime activities in Nigeria. Its responsibilities include, among other things, inspect ships for the purposes of maritime safety, maritime security, maritime labor and prevention of maritime pollution.¹¹

(ii) The National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (“NDLEA”)

The NDLEA, established by the NDLEA Act¹², is responsible for, among other things, ‘adoption of measures to identify, trace, freeze, confiscate or seize proceeds derived from drug-related offences or property whose value corresponds to such proceeds; and adoption of measures to eradicate illicit cultivation of narcotic plants and to eliminate illicit demand for narcotic drugs

⁹ Ukwai, J. K., Okpa, J. T., Akwaji, F: Trends in Illicit Drug Trafficking in Nigeria: Highlighting the Imperative of Raising the Red Flag: American Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Vol. 4, No. 1, 25-37, 2019.

¹⁰ Cap N162, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria

¹¹ Section 22 (2) (a) of the NIMASA Act.

¹² Cap N30, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria

and psychotropic substances with a view to reducing human suffering and eliminating financial incentives for illicit traffic in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances.¹³

In 2024, the agency, in its commitment to curb smuggling of illegal narcotics in Nigeria, through various ports in the country, commissioned the NDLEA Marine Command HQs, a special unit created to bolster capacity of the anti-narcotic body within the maritime space and to further tighten the noose on drug barons and cartels of illicit substances on the waterways and seaports in Nigeria.¹⁴

(iii) The Nigerian Ports Authority (“NPA”)

The Nigerian Ports Authority is a Federal Government agency tasked with the responsibility to govern and operate Nigerian ports. The operations of the NPA are carried out under the supervision of the Federal Ministry of Marine & Blue Economy. It also operates in collaboration with other Government Agencies. Though the NPA is presently under concession, its statutory duties are well performed to ensure smooth running of Nigerian ports.

(iv) Security agencies

- The Nigerian Navy, Nigerian Customs, Nigerian Army, Nigerian Police and the Department of State Services (DSS) also have a strong role in backing the primary agencies in the fulfilment of their functions. Essentially, they provide military/paramilitary assistance to the primary agencies like NIMASA, NPA and NDLEA in the bid to carry out their assignments in the ports, assignment that include eradicating smuggling of illegal narcotics in Nigerian ports.

¹³ Sections 3 (1) (c) – (d) NDLEA Act.

¹⁴ <https://tribuneonlineng.com/ndlea-tightens-noose-on-drug-barons-as-british-govt-commissions-marine-command/>

5. Guidelines to Ship Owners on Measures to Prevent Narcotics Smuggling at Ports in Nigeria

i. Collaborations with Law Enforcement Agencies in the Maritime Industry-

First on the list of guidelines to shipowners in Nigeria in the efforts to curb narcotics smuggling into Nigeria is active collaboration with law enforcement agencies. It has earlier been stated that NIMASA and NDLEA have significant responsibilities and duties to curb drug menace in Nigerian Ports. It is crucial that shipowners use the expertise and experience of these agencies in detecting smugglers of illegal narcotics. This measure, if explored and utilized to its maximum potential will yield tangible results in the fight against illegal narcotics. For example, in 2021, NDLEA and the Nigeria Shippers Council agreed to partner/collaborate to check drug trafficking via ports,¹⁵ a development which yielded tangible fruits.

In January 2025, the NDLEA reported that a total of 338,200 bottles of codeine-based syrup worth over N1.19 billion were intercepted in two containers at the Port Harcourt Ports Complex, Onne, Rivers State.¹⁶

Law enforcement agencies can also collaborate with each other for effective functioning, which in the long run benefits ship owners and all maritime stakeholders in the fight against drugs/narcotics smuggling. In January 2025, The Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA) and the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) pledged

¹⁵ <https://guardian.ng/news/ndlea-shippers-collaborate-to-check-drug-trafficking-via-ports/>

¹⁶ <https://www.legit.ng/nigeria/1635168-ndlea-update-number-arrests-seized-items-nationwide-operation/>

collaboration in the fight against drug trafficking and abuse, particularly within the maritime corridors.¹⁷

ii. Compliance with Guidelines Issued by Government Agencies in the Maritime Sector-

The NDLEA, NIMASA, and other regulatory bodies, through their directions continue to issue recommendations/guidelines to provide safety measures in the long run for shipowners to curb the menace of illegal narcotics smuggling and provide other safety/security measures for shipowners and other stakeholders in the industry.

For instance, the Maritime Safety and Seafarers Standard Department (MSSSD) of NIMASA primarily regulates shipping activities in Nigeria through the implementation of relevant IMO Conventions which have been ratified, domesticated and published.¹⁸ Some of these regulations may not directly relate to illegal narcotics, however, when complied with, the ripple effect is sure to provide safety and security improvement to shipowners. Recently, NIMASA issued the Merchant Shipping (Safe Manning, Hours of Work and Watchkeeping) Regulations which stipulates that shipmasters must provide requisite schedule for regular watchkeeping and ship-handling, among other measures.¹⁹ This is to ensure important sections of a ship are manned and watched regularly. This of course is sure to curb the activities of smugglers. Also, the master and the Ship Security Officer (SSO) are required to regularly arrange crew training sessions regarding the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code, Ship's

¹⁷ https://thenationonlineng.net/nimasa-ndlea-to-combat-drug-trafficking/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

¹⁸ The Department is statutorily empowered by Section 22, Part IV of the NIMASA Act 2007 and the Merchant Shipping Act (MSA) 2007.

¹⁹ Sections 5 and 6 of the Regulations

Security Plan (SSP), security duties, port operations and overall general awareness to reduce security threats.

iii. **Providing Strict Security Measures/Improved Technological Innovations**

It is also important that shipowners are leveraging technological innovations, enhancing intelligence capabilities and fostering collaboration among stakeholders. A very helpful guide is the preventive measures implemented by Pacific Basin Shipping.²⁰ It was reported that in 2023 alone, the company allocated \$5.3 million to security initiatives, including, installing barbed wire fencing around ships, and illuminating decks at night, deploying portable and fixed CCTV cameras for continuous monitoring, patrol boats for offshore monitoring and utilizing drones for underwater inspections.²¹

It is also recommended that shipowners arrange K9 drug detection teams and regularly conduct underwater diving inspections to ensure vessels depart ports drug-free.²²

iv. **Improving on Due Diligence**

This includes proper documentation as well as coordination with local shipping agents. It is generally believed now that smuggling activities are orchestrated by large, well-organized cartels with significant funding and extensive intelligence networks.²³ These cartels gather

²⁰ <https://guardian.ng/business-services/maritime/combating-drug-trafficking-from-nigerian-ports/#:~:text=He%20recommended%20deploying%20portable%20and,vessels%20depart%20ports%20drug-free>

²¹ *supras*

²² *supra*

²³ <https://guardian.ng/business-services/maritime/combating-drug-trafficking-from-nigerian-ports/#:~:text=He%20recommended%20deploying%20portable%20and,vessels%20depart%20ports%20drug-free>

critical information on ship design configurations and routing schedules to aid their illicit operations, hence the need for top notch due diligence by ship owners and the crew. Rudder trunk spaces, overboard openings, exposed thrusters/propeller regions are some of the accessible areas likely to be used by the drug traffickers for storing illegal substances. It is recommended to install physical barriers to prevent unauthorized access in these spaces.²⁴

Also, it has been recommended²⁵ that the following due diligence (proper documentation) measures be put in place:

- i. A list of all visitors seeking to board the ship and their reasons for doing so should be confirmed by local agents. Strict access control with thorough entry checks (verifying photo IDs, work orders, etc.) should be implemented. Those unwilling to co-operate or provide suitable proof of identity should be denied access to the ship.
- ii. Visitors boarding the vessel should be liable to random search in accordance with the current security level procedures stated in the SSP. Any such security screening shall be undertaken in a sensitive manner.
- iii. The vessel should keep an accurate record of all activities on and around the vessel from arrival until departure. The log should be frequently checked by the watchmen and SSO for any irregularities in the entries.²⁶

²⁴ <https://safety4sea.com/seven-best-practices-to-avoid-smuggling/>

²⁵ <https://www.standard-club.com/knowledge-news/article-drug-smuggling-preventative-measures-1452/>

²⁶ Supra

v. Implementing International Regulations/Recommendations from International Conventions.

Safety4sea.com²⁷ recommends that some of the preventive measures below be utilized by shipowners in prevention of narcotics smuggling in Ports across the world:

- i. In known drug smuggling areas, members should consider hiring additional security watchmen and arranging an underwater hull inspection before departure (some ports may enforce official drugs and underwater hull inspection before ship's sailing).
- ii. Awareness against the use and possession of drugs on board ships is necessary among crewmembers. Crew should be briefed in advance of a port call that any such co-operation with the drug traffickers/smugglers may not only violate company policy but also result in severe consequences by local authorities.
- iii. Vigilance should be maintained while in port or at anchor, including enhanced security patrols on deck and continuous monitoring of all restricted areas (especially during hours of darkness or poor visibility). Additional lighting across all areas on exposed decks should be arranged to illuminate all possible shadow areas. Any suspicious activity observed close to the vessel (divers or small boats) should be immediately communicated to the master and, in turn, the master should report this situation to the local authorities.
- iv. A thorough search of all compartments shall be carried out prior to the ship's departure and again after disembarking the pilot (but before commencement of the sea passage). All events and searches shall be duly recorded in the ship's logbook as well as in the security log by the SSO.

²⁷ <https://safety4sea.com/seven-best-practices-to-avoid-smuggling/>

6. Conclusion

Though Nigerian ports continue to face significant security breaches and smuggling of illegal narcotics, if shipowners, security agencies, policy makers and other stakeholders in the industry continue to invest in the training of its crew, advance technological and security devices, there would be substantial success in the fight against smuggling of illegal narcotics. And if the efforts are sustained for a substantial length of time, it would reflect a commitment to combating drug cartels and safeguarding crews and assets. By implementing these measures, Nigeria can mitigate the economic and social impact of drug smuggling and restore confidence in its maritime sector.

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