

SABATINO PIZZOLANTE

Circular for P & I Clubs

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Correspondents for:

North of England (through Globalpandi, S.A.), Assuranceforeningen SKULD, British Marine, The Charterers Mutual Assurance Association Limited, Through Transport Club (TTC), ITIC, Raets P&I and InterCoastal P&I.

Venezuelan Merchant Marine joins General Strike

Following the general strike agreed last week by the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV), the Coordinadora Democratica grouping the main Venezuela's opposition parties and Fedecamaras, the body gathering a huge number of private industries and companies, the merchant marine has widely joined now the general strike that continues for its consecutive eighth day. The general strike was first aimed to force President Chavez to accept a referendum next February or to call general elections shortly, but after the massacre of Plaza Altamira last Friday, where three civilians were killed and more than twenty were wounded by gunmen, the general strike seeks his resignation.

The top management and a significant number of workers of Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), the state-owned oil company, fully support this general strike, so affecting the oil industry's production which from 3m barrels per day has suffered a reduction of at least 50% due to distribution bottlenecks and lack of storage space, forcing the petrol stations to close as they are run out of product. Besides, last week the captain and crew of the oil tanker "Pilin Leon", owned by PDVSA, carrying 280,000 barrels of gasoline, anchored their vessel off the western city of Maracaibo to join the general strike and to protest President Chavez's government, an action that was regarded by the former as "an act of piracy", ordering the navy to seize the vessel. At least seven more tankers were anchored in protest at Puerto La Cruz and Jose area. All tankers currently remain at anchor as

their crews refuse to move them. The action taken by the tankers was also backed by the oil terminal of Guaraguao.

Over the weekend other merchant marine services such as pilotage and towage at the Orinoco River, Puerto Cabello and the rest of the country's ports have joined the general strike, affecting normal operations and practically causing the closure of them. Puerto Cabello is reported to have 10 vessels at anchor whereas 8 vessels remain within the port area without being able to depart. At least 14 vessels have been deviated to neighbouring ports such as Cartagena and Curacao. Port activity is being also affected due to customs workers joining the strike.

The situation is extremely difficult as the government has brought the National Guard and the Army into the oil industry's main refineries and marine terminals accompanied by supporters of the President Chavez. Conversations between the government and the Coordinadora Democratica is taking place at Caracas under the mediation of the Organization of American States without visible results.

Therefore, it is advisable for the Members to take into account the current political situation as explained above, deviating the vessels where possible to avoid unnecessary delays.

Should you need any assistance or further information regarding the topic stated above, please feel free to contact:

SABATINO PIZZOLANTE ATTORNEYS' OFFICE
Centro Comercial Inversiones Pareca, Piso 2, Ofic. 2-08/2-09,
Av. Salom, Urb. Cumboto Sur, Puerto Cabello, VENEZUELA.
Phones: +58-242-3641801/3641026/3641798
Fax: +58-242-3640998
M obiles: +58-412-4210036/3420555
E-mail: mail@sabatinop.com
Webpage: www.sabatinop.com
AOH: +58-412-4210036
Contact: Mr. José Alfredo Sabatino Pizzolante.