

SHIP ARREST IN PANAMA (Questions 1 to 9)



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1. Please give an overview of ship arrest practice in your country.

The Republic of Panama and the Panama Canal are brand names in international shipping. The Panamanian Ship Registry is the largest in the world in number of vessels as well as tonnage. The Panama Canal is a focal point since there are over 21,000 ships calling Panamanian Ports every year and over 14,000 of them transit the waterway.

Until March, 1982, a United States Federal District Court for the Canal Zone (1) handled maritime claims at the Panama Canal. Since then, as a result of the Panama Canal Treaty Torrijos-Carter, Panama took over its maritime jurisdiction and the Maritime Court of Panama was created by Law 8 of 1982, which also adopted procedural rules closely patterned following the U.S. Rules of Civil Procedure. Since 1982 Maritime Court of Panama functioned as a specialized tribunal where the Judge is required by law to bear maritime law expertise; today there are two specialized maritime courts, being a direct consequence of a growing practice in the maritime litigation field.

Furthermore, the National Assembly of Panama adopted a bill amending the existing procedural rules for admiralty claims. The Maritime Code of Panama amended by Law 12 of 2009, fashioned after the U.S. Supplemental Rules for certain Admiralty and Maritime Claims of Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, incorporated American procedural devices such as: oral trials, discovery, arrests procedures, limitation of liability and mixed in rem and in personam claims.

All ships present in Panama, whether transiting the canal or calling any port, are subject to the jurisdiction of the Maritime Courts of Panama. Regardless of the flag, or the place where the claim arose, whether inside or outside Panama, the Maritime Courts will exercise its maritime jurisdiction. This is commonly referred to as forum arresti. Any vessel is subject to be arrested either under an in rem theory or an in personam action.

2. Which International Convention applies to arrest of ships in your country?

Panama has not ratified any of the International Conventions related to Ship Arrests. However where the applicable law to the claim is that of a country which has ratified any Convention the Maritime Courts of Panama will enforce it in cases where the law of the flag or the law of a particular country applies to the dispute. Panama adopted a statutory provision for the determination of the applicable law.

3. Is there any other way to arrest a ship in your jurisdiction?

Under our procedural rules, there are three ways to arrest a vessel. First, any vessel or property can be arrested so that a defendant cannot dissipate assets beyond the jurisdiction by depositing a 20-30% bond of the amount in controversy when defendant's property is found within the territory of the Republic of Panama. A defendant is "present" in Panama when its real and effective place of business is in the territory of the Republic of Panama. Second, a vessel can be arrested ascribe the Courts jurisdiction when such a defendant is not present for purposes of jurisdiction or when an asset of defendant property is attached in order to serve process. Finally, a Maritime Court may exercise its jurisdiction to enforce maritime liens or encumbrances via an in rem action.

A variety of an administrative arrest is also available to plaintiffs. Under an Article 206 of the Panama Maritime Code, any Panamanian Vessels' Registration can be blocked at the Shipping Registry so as to prohibit its sale, deletion, transfer or registration of a mortgage or encumbrance. The evidentiary standard for this type of proceeding requires a showing that an "immediate and irreparable harm" may occur. A discretionary deposit may be ordered by the Court in the sum of no less than US\$ 10,000 to not more than US\$ 50,000.

4. Are these alternatives e.g. saisie conservatoire or freezing order?

Panama does not have the saisie conservatoire or freezing orders as they are known in France or in the United Kingdom. However, the same results are obtainable under the arrest procedure established by the Maritime Code.

5. For which types of claims can you arrest a ship?

In the case of in rem claim, if the applicable law concedes a maritime lien or a statutory right in rem, any vessel can be arrested. In Panama cargo or freight belonging to the defendant are also subject to being arrested on an in rem claim.

In the case of an in personam claim, any claim arising out of acts related to maritime commerce, transportation and traffic arising inside or outside the territory of Panama and when the claims arises from an act or that are or should be executed from, through or to Panama the Court will try the claim.

The amended maritime Law of 2009 also permits the filing of “mixed” or combined actions in rem and in personam, where the applicable law sets in rem and in personam liability for the underlying claim.

Claims that have been tried in the Panamanian Courts involve Personal Injury claims, Seaman labour claims, Longshore workers claims, Insurance litigation, P&I direct actions, Collisions & allisions, Charter party disputes, Contractual claims, Cargo claims, Necessaries, Bunkers, Maritime claims based on negligence, Vessel property disputes, Mortgage executions, Towage, Limitations of liability procedures, Salvage, General Average and Arbitration.

6. Can you arrest a ship irrespectively of her flag?

Yes, in Panama the mere presence of any vessel at Panamanian waters, whether to transit the Panama Canal or to call any Panamanian port, gives the maritime court jurisdiction in rem over the vessel and in personam over the owners, operators and charterers. Panama does not recognize governmental immunity for state owned commercial trading vessels.

7. Can you arrest a ship irrespectively of the debtor?

In Panama, the claims subject to Panamanian Law permit the arrest of a vessel, regardless of whether the underlying debt is incurred by owner, disponent owner, operator or charterer. Under Panama Law anyone with authority binds the vessel in rem, if the supplier is not timely notified otherwise.

8. What is the position as regards sister ships and ships in associated ownership?

There are two separate matters here. If the applicable law to the claim permits the arrest of sisterships or associated ownership vessels, Panama will recognize it. In cases where Panama Law is applicable sistership arrest is permitted if the vessel are owned by the same company in an in personam claim. If the claim is in rem, the action has to be directed against the same vessel. However, Panama permits mixed or combined claims, where there is a maritime lien or a statutory right in rem and there is in personam liability upon owners, operators or charterers. In addition, where the applicable foreign law permits the arrest of “associated” ships Panama will recognize it.

In Panama piercing the corporate veil is an extraordinary remedy only available in cases of fraud or violation of public policy.

9. What is the position as regards Bareboat and Time-Chartered vessels?

Under Panama Law anyone with authority over the vessel, owner, disponent owner, bareboat charterer, operator and/or time charterer binds the vessel for goods and services provided, except where the supplier is timely advised otherwise. As to cargo damages liability, the vessel is liable in rem regardless of who has control. In addition Bareboat and Time Charterers are liable in an in personam claim where the applicable law so permits.

Notice should be taken that under Panama law there is a system of registration of bareboat charters, which sets the liability of the charterer for operative liability of the vessel, keeping ownership issues in the original registration.

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Since 1991 Mr. Carreira-Pitti has been a speaker at more than 50 international events, including the Lloyd's Ship Arrest 2011 Conference in London. Mr. Carreira-Pitti has the honor of being the first Panamanian Lawyer admitted to practice before the Supreme Court of the United States and is also a Candidate to Solicitor by the Law Society de England & Wales.

SHIP ARREST IN PANAMA (Questions 10 to 26)



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10. Do your Courts require counter-security in order to arrest a ship?

Yes. It depends on the purpose of the arrest: a) prevent disposition (20 to 30% of the amount of the complaint); b) to give jurisdiction to the court over the owner (US\$ 1,000.00); or c) for enforcement of maritime liens (US\$ 1,000.00).

An up-front amount of US\$2,500.00 would be required upon submitting the arrest petition for maintenance and the Marshall would thereupon be entitled to require additional amounts. Failure to do so would result in the release of the asset.

11. Is there any difference in respect to arresting a ship for a maritime claim and a maritime lien?

Not in terms of the procedure for the arrest itself. The Law also provides for mix proceedings (in rem and in-personam). Foreign law could apply to determine the right to arrest.

12. Does your country recognise maritime liens? Under which International Convention, if any?

The concept of maritime lien against the vessel, freight and cargo is expressly contemplated in the law of Maritime Commerce.

Liens may be recognised under foreign law, by application of conflict of law rules and there are also special provisions for enforcement of naval mortgages, which applies to national and foreign vessels which are arrested in Panama.

Panama has not ratified international conventions on maritime liens.

13. What lapse of time is required in order to arrest a ship since the moment the file arrives to your law firm?

The arrest of a vessel could be arranged on a same day basis, considering that the Court and the Marshall would be available (as provided in the law) 24 hours.

14. Do you need to provide a POA, or any other documents of the claim to the Court?

The POA, in principle, and prima facie evidence of the right to claim would be needed when submitting the application for arrest (and the corresponding complaint).

By supplementary application of the Code of Civil Procedure, it is possible for a lawyer to act in lieu of POA (i.e. negotiorum gestor). The POA would have to be submitted within 60 days. In case of foreign entities, proof of existence of the same (i.e. certificate of existence or good-standing) would also be necessary.

15. What original documents are required, what documents can be filed electronically, what documents require notarisation and/or apostille, and when are they needed?

The general rule is that documents must be filed in original form; in particular, documents deemed of a "public" source (coming from an official or Governmental entity).

The law expressly provides that public documents issued outside of Panama would have to be legalised to be admissible in Court, either by Panamanian Consul or, where the 1961 Hage Convention applies, Apostilled, or in lieu thereof by the Consul of a country deemed amicable to Panama.

The law provides for the possibility of admission of copies, including discovery motions to seek agreement of the parties in this connection, which is commonly accepted. The Judge should assess overall under rules of logic and experience (ie "sana critica").

Documents deemed essential for the representation of the parties, such as power of attorney are to be produced in original and duly noticed and legalised (see 14 above). Currently, documents are

to be filed with the Court as opposed to allowing electronic filings.

16. Will your Courts accept jurisdiction over the substantive claim once a vessel has been arrested?

Generally, the arrest in the events mentioned in item 10 above are meant to support proceedings which, in turn, implies the review of a matter on the merits by the Court.

17. What is the procedure to release a ship from arrest?

Response. The law provides that the plaintiff may unilaterally do so. Also by posting of security and filing a request. This could be made unilateral by the defendant/owner of the asset or a third party, or jointly by plaintiff and defendant/owner of the asset.

Failure of the plaintiff to consign relevant maintenance amounts, after five days from a request, also allows the Marshall to proceed with the release.

18. What type of security needs to be placed for the release?

Response. The law provides the following alternatives:

1. Cash or Certificate of Judicial Deposit at the National Bank of Panama
2. Letter of Guarantee, Certified or Cashier's Cheque from a local bank holding a general license.
3. Surety from an insurance company licensed in Panama.
4. Other which the parties may agree.

19. Does security need to cover interest and costs?

Response. Yes, these would be assessed by the Judge upon fixing the amount of release bond. However the parties may agree in terms of amount, thus also excluding interest or costs.

20. Are P&I LOUs accepted as sufficient to lift the arrest?

Response. These are, but would need the acquiescence of the plaintiff.

21. How long does it take to release the ship?

Response. Usually within the day of filing of the request (including if the necessary release bond is duly consigned with the Court)

22. Is there a procedure to contest the arrest?

Response. Yes, this involves a motion duly supported for wrongful arrest, when there is a mistake in the asset to be attached or ownership thereof, the absence or inexistence of an alleged maritime lien causing the arrest or against an agreement no to arrest.

23. Which period of time will be granted by the Courts in order for the claimants to take legal action on the merits?

As per 16, above, the complaint would have to be filed at the time of the request of the arrest. The Court would review if the underlying claim stands (*prima facie*) to initiate the proceedings with the admission of the complaint.

The order for the arrest of a vessel would be served together with the complaint, and would trigger the term to answer the complaint, to start the proceedings.

24. Do the Courts of your country acknowledge wrongful arrest?

The law contemplates the following specific proof for wrongful arrest when: a) the arrest has been performed over property which is different from the one against which the suit was brought; or b) which does not belong to the defendant; or c) on which the maritime lien or in rem right for whose execution the arrest was requested is extinguished or inexistent; or d) if the arrest was requested in contravention of a prior agreement between the parties, as the case may be; as overall.

25. Do the Courts of your country acknowledge the piercing and lifting of the corporate veil?

This would be in exceptional situations involving fraud or criminal actions, before competent courts in that respect. Therefore, it should be noted that Maritime Courts may be reluctant to do so, on strictly maritime causes of action, without an order or further support from a Penal Court.

26. Is it possible to have a ship sold *pendente lite*; if so how long does it take?

Yes, in the following situations:

a) If the arrest may result in a deterioration of the vessel (depending on its type); b) After 30 days from date of the arrest; c) If the costs for custody and maintenance become excessive in respect to the sale value; d) If the complaint is not timely answered;

The first three scenarios would require the intervention of both parties, whilst the fourth, would proceed at the request of the claimant and in case of enforcement of naval mortgages, *ipso jure*.

The proceeds would then be deposited at the National Bank of Panama, in an interest bearing account.

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Foreign associate with Kelley Drye & Warren in Washington D.C. (1989); over 23 years concentrating in ship registration, ship finance and maritime litigation – Partner at Arias, Fabrega & Fabrega; Board of Directors of the Panama Maritime Law Association from 2008-2012; Drafting Committee to Amendments of 2009 to Law 8 of 1982 of Maritime Judicial Procedure.

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