

Fuel tanker collision in East China Sea

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Two large ships, the MV Sanchi, an Iranian tanker and the CF Crystal, a bulk carrier, collided on Saturday evening off the coast of China, roughly 160 nautical miles east of Shanghai. The tanker is still ablaze and all its crew members are missing, believed dead.

Chinese authorities fear that the vessel could explode or sink to the seabed, leaking large quantities of crude oil into the East China Sea and threatening widespread pollution of coastal waters.

The incident occurred at approximately 8 p.m. local time. The MV Sanchi, carrying 136,000 tonnes of fuel to South Korea, collided with the Hong-Kong registered CF Crystal, which was heading south to Guangdong with 64,000 tonnes of grain from the US. Chinese authorities initiated an investigation but no details of the collision have been released.

According to TradeWinds, a news source for global shipping, the CF Crystal suffered “non-fatal” damage to its bow, and proceeded with the assistance of a tug to the port of Zhoushan, 150 kilometres south of Shanghai. The 21 mariners on board, all Chinese nationals, were rescued safely.

The MV Sanchi, however, was set ablaze. Poor weather conditions, including strong winds, rain and high waves, along with thick, toxic plumes of smoke from the vessel, have severely hampered search and rescue efforts.

One unidentified body was found in the water near the tanker on Monday. But the fate of the other 32 crew members—30 Iranians and 2 Bengalis—is unknown. Given the intensity of the blaze and failure to find anyone in the water, it is increasingly likely they are dead.

China sent vessels to try to bring the fire under control and search for survivors, including two law enforcement craft, two rescue boats, three cleaning ships and a high-powered tugboat. South Korea provided a marine police ship and a fixed-wing aircraft

for the operation, which was coordinated by the China Maritime Search and Rescue Centre.

The US Navy sent a P-8A fixed-wing aircraft from its Pacific Fleet on Sunday to search for survivors over a radius of 3,600 nautical miles. No one was found.

The Shanghai Maritime Safety Administration has cordoned off a 10-nautical-mile exclusion zone around the Sanchi, and rescue and salvage workers have been provided with protective suits, protective masks and gas testing equipment.

Preventing an environmental disaster depends on putting out the fire and keeping the MV Sanchi afloat.

The ship was carrying an ultra-light version of crude oil called condensate, which is used for jet fuel, petrol and diesel. It is more toxic and combustible than regular crude oil, as well as being almost transparent and odourless.

Authorities are hoping most of the oil will burn off and dissipate. However, should the vessel sink due to secondary explosions, the condensate could leak into the surrounding waters where it would prove difficult to contain and remove.

University of Southampton oceanographer Dr Simon Boxall told the BBC: “Potentially the entire load, 136,000 tonnes, could end up in the ocean, and that would put this in the top 10 spills of all time, so it is significant.”

Boxall pointed out that condensates, unlike heavier crude oil, could not be picked off the water’s surface. “It’s not like crude [oil], which does break down under natural microbial action; this stuff actually kills the microbes that break the oil down,” he warned.

“If she sinks with a lot of cargo intact, then you have a time bomb on the sea bed which will slowly release condensate. There could be a long-term exclusion of fishing for many hundreds of kilometres in this area.”

According to the BBC, the Sanchi’s load is equivalent to about 35 million gallons, making the

potential leak more than three times larger than the Exxon Valdez spill in 1989, which is considered one of the world's worst environmental disasters.

The National Iranian Tanker Company (NITC), the MV Sanchi's owner, has downplayed the risks. NITC managing director Siroos Kianersi said: "[D]espite the current state of the ship and the damages to the hull, the possibility of sinking is low."

NITC reported that two of its tankers and a vessel belonging to the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL) are also taking part in the search. The NITC, Iran's Port Maritime Organisation (PMO) and the Panamanian Maritime Authority launched investigations into the cause of the accident, in conjunction with the Shanghai Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centre (MRCC).

This is the second recent collision involving an NITC vessel. In August 2016, one of its tankers struck a Swiss ship in the Singapore Strait. In this instance, both ships were damaged but there were no injuries or oil spill.



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