Stricken Iranian tanker sinks, causing major oil spill in East China Sea

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An Iranian fuel tanker, which collided with a Hong-Kong registered cargo ship over a week ago and caught fire, exploded and sank in the East China Sea on Sunday. The sinking ended hopes of finding survivors from the tanker's crew and caused a huge spill of petroleum condensate.

After a week of burning and leaking its volatile contents after the collision, the MV Sanchi experienced additional explosions around 3 p.m. (AEDT) on Sunday and "suddenly ignited", China Central Television (CCTV) said. The tanker listed to its starboard side, emitting thick smoke approximately 1,000 metres high. By 5 p.m., the tanker had sunk, plunging whatever was left of its volatile cargo into the sea.

All the tanker's crew members—30 Iranians and 2 Bengalis—are now presumed dead by authorities. One body had been found floating in the water near the ship on January 8.

The ships initially crashed on the night of January 6, roughly 160 nautical miles east of Shanghai, though the cause of the incident remains unclear and under investigation.

The Sanchi, owned by the National Iranian Tanker Company (NITC), was carrying 136,000 metric tons of condensate, an ultra-light form of crude oil, from Iran to South Korea. It collided with the CF Crystal, which was travelling with a cargo of grain from the US to southern China. The Crystal experienced damage to its hull but was escorted to the nearby commercial port of Zhoushan with its 21 crew members rescued safely.

Attempts to rescue the mariners aboard the Sanchi last week were hampered by strong winds, heavy rain and a persistent plume of toxic smoke engulfing the tanker.

On Saturday a four-member Chinese salvage team successfully boarded the ship, retrieving two bodies encountered in a lifeboat. They also recovered the ship's Voyage Data Recorder, a shipping vessel's equivalent of an airliner's "Black Box," containing data that may relate to the cause of the collision.

Due to a change in wind direction, the salvage team was threatened with being surrounded in noxious smoke and had to beat a swift retreat, according to Xinhua news.

"After recovering the black box, the rescuers tried to reach the living areas. But the temperature reached 89C (192F) and they could not enter," the Chinese Transport Ministry said in a statement.

CCTV reported that the fire on the water's surface was extinguished on Monday by two ships that doused the oil with chemical agents in an attempt to dissolve the substance.

China's State Oceanic Administration reported that several oil slicks remained, with one 15 kilometres long to the southwest of the sunken vessel and one stretching 18 km to the east. Both were likely to move northward, due to the wind and sea currents.

The Iranian government, rocked by a series of mass working class protests against inequality, attempted to contain outrage over the disaster by declaring a day of mourning on Monday. According to an official statement, the event honoured "the brave mariners who died in the course of their mission to advance the country's goals and suffered a terrible disaster and joined the martyrs."

Eshaq Jahangiri, Iran's first vice president, said efforts by its commando task force to recover the remaining 29 crew members ceased when the tanker sank.

Families of the deceased were informed of the news at the NITC headquarters in Tehran, resulting in an upwelling of grief and anger. Some were so distressed they were taken by ambulance to nearby hospitals.

According to EuroNews, one angry woman cried: "Thirty-two people died without funerals and without coffins and they burn into ashes while their families are wailing here. You, the government, have come out for 10 days to sympathise with them? What sympathy are you

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talking about?”

The sinking of the Sanchi means that its cargo of condensate, which is virtually colourless and odourless, and does not form a typical oil slick, will likely leak into the surrounding waters. According to a safety data sheet issued by the crude oil supplier ConocoPhillips, condensate causes “skin corrosion/irritation” and is “toxic to aquatic life with long-lasting effects.”

The ship’s fuel tank may also be leaking. It has a capacity of 1,000 metric tonnes, according to Chinese media.

An oil spill expert, Richard Steiner, told Agence France-Presse the accident was “the single largest environmental release of petroleum condensate in history.”

Steiner said: “Given the poor condition of the hull of the ship after a week of explosions and fire, it is my assumption that none of the cargo holds or fuel compartments remain intact, and thus all of the condensate and fuel has been released.”

According to Greenpeace, the East China Sea contains important spawning grounds for fish, and a migratory route for three types of whales, including the humpback whale, right whale and gray whale. In addition, Greenpeace reported that the Zhoushan Islands, west of the crash site, harbour productive fishing grounds. In 2016, five million tonnes of fish were caught in the region.

Steiner warned that all kinds of marine life, as well as seabirds in contact with the crude oil, would either die quickly or develop “sub-lethal injuries,” such as physiological impairment, reproductive failure and chronic diseases, which could persist in the area over a longer period than regular oil spills.

Steiner indicated that corporate responsibility was being sidestepped. “As no one has been conducting a scientific assessment of (the environmental impact), the governments and ship owners are likely to claim, erroneously, there was limited damage.”

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