Funnel removed from US Navy ship stuck on coral reef

February 27 2013

The USS Guardian sits aground on the UN World Heritage-listed Tubbataha coral reef in the Philippines, January 22, 2013. Salvage teams have removed the funnel from the US Navy ship after bad weather caused weeks of delays, the coastguard said on Wednesday.

Salvage teams have removed the funnel from a US Navy ship stranded on a UN World Heritage-listed coral reef in the Philippines after bad weather caused weeks of delays, the coastguard said on Wednesday.

The 68-metre (223-foot) USS Guardian minesweeper became stuck on the Tubbataha Reef on January 17 and strong winds and heavy seas have hampered the operation to dismantle it.

The salvagers hailed the removal on Tuesday of the funnel as a major step.

The team has also removed the ship's winch, used to operate its sonar equipment, and plans to dismantle the mast later Wednesday, said regional coastguard spokeswoman Lieutenant Greanata Jude.

A Philippine coast guard wades towards the USS Guardian trapped on the Tubbataha coral reef, January 22, 2013 off the western island of Palawan after it ran aground on January 17.

"Most of the equipment on top of the deck has already been transferred to a barge but they have yet to get the large equipment inside the ship," she told AFP.

Sensitive equipment from the USS Guardian will be re-used but most of the ship will have to be scrapped after its hull was breached when it ran aground the reef in a remote part of the Sulu Sea, she said.

The ship damaged a section of the reef, a UNESCO World Heritage site, known for its rich marine life. President Benigno Aquino has said the US Navy will have to pay penalties for the damage.

The US Navy had originally targeted March 23 for the full removal of the vessel but the bad weather could change the timeframe, Jude said.

The wood-and-fibreglass hulled boat, estimated to cost about $277 million, was too badly damaged to be towed away, the US Navy said earlier.

The United States has repeatedly apologised for the incident, which it has blamed on faulty maps, but it has fuelled anger in the Philippines, a former American colony and important US ally in the Asia-Pacific region.

Vessels sailing into the Tubbataha marine park need permission but Philippine authorities said the crew of the Guardian had made no request to enter and had even ignored radio messages that it was about to hit the reef.

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