

Rescued Antarctic scientists back on dry land

January 22 2014



A penguin stands near the MV Akademik Shokalskiy (R), shown stuck in the ice off East Antarctica, December 31, 2013

Scientists whose Antarctic expedition became trapped in sea ice finally returned to dry land Wednesday, apologising for the disruption and facing questions over who will pay for the international rescue mission.

The scientists were among the 52 passengers plucked by helicopter from their stranded Russian ship, the Akademik Shokalskiy, on January 2 after Chinese and Australian icebreakers failed to cut through the ice to

[rescue](#) them.

A helicopter from the Chinese ship transferred them to the Australian ship the Aurora Australis, which docked in Hobart on Wednesday.

The rescue, estimated to have cost up to Aus\$2.4 million (US\$2.1 million), prompted harsh criticism from some quarters because it diverted resources from scientific programmes in Antarctica's Southern Hemisphere summer.

Expedition leader Chris Turney said the rescue operation—which included French, Chinese and Australian ships—had been a great example of the international cooperation possible in the remote and inhospitable Antarctic.

"We are terribly sorry for any impact that might have had on fellow colleagues, whose work has been delayed from the operation, but any experienced Antarctic scientist knows that's an inherent risk," he told reporters.

"We hope they are going to have a good season to hopefully catch up on their work."

The Australian Antarctic Division (AAD) said its "science season" had been disrupted by the rescue which involved a two-week diversion by the Aurora Australis from its schedule.



A helicopter from the nearby Chinese icebreaker Xue Long hovers above passengers from the Russian ship MV Akademik Shokalskiy as the rescue takes place in Antarctica, January 2, 2014

The icebreaker had to interrupt its resupply of vital resources to Australia's Casey research station to get to the Shokalskiy.

It had to then return to Casey, with the 52 rescued passengers on board, to complete the delivery of fuel, food and equipment needed for winter.

"We have tried to minimise disruption to our science and other programmes but it is too early to determine in detail the flow-on effects to our programmes," AAD director Tony Fleming said.

The AAD said it would attempt to recoup the cost of the rescue, which is still being determined but estimated at between Aus\$1.8 and Aus\$2.4 million, via the insurers of the Shokalskiy and the university behind the

expedition.

"The government will be pursuing all avenues to recover costs and minimise the burden to the Australian taxpayer," Fleming said.

The Shokalskiy became stuck near Commonwealth Bay, 100 nautical miles east of the French base Dumont d'Urville, on December 24 and endured a fierce blizzard soon afterwards.

The rescue mission was beset by extreme conditions from the start, with the Chinese icebreaker Xue Long and Aurora Australis both unable to break through to free the stranded Russian ship.

The Xue Long then itself became stuck in ice after helicoptering the Russian ship's passengers to safety. Both it and the Shokalskiy, which had been left with their crews onboard, eventually freed themselves.

Turney, an academic at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, said many Antarctic missions became beset by ice. In the case of his expedition, it was a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, he said.

"The fundamental problem was there was obviously a massive upheaval of movement of [sea ice](#) from another part of Antarctica... we hadn't seen that in any of the satellite imagery before and it caught us," he said.

The expedition was aimed at emulating a 1911-1914 journey by the Australian explorer, Sir Douglas Mawson with the scientists onboard, assisted by the passengers, repeating century-old measurements to discover the environmental changes taking place in the frozen southern region.

They were also looking at the circulation of the Southern Ocean and the

sub-Antarctic islands as thermometers of climatic change but the trip was criticised as a "commemorative expedition" with no scientific interest, which Turney rejected.

There was relief on Wednesday as the [passengers](#) finally disembarked from the journey which originally set off in late November, and included Christmas and New Year stuck in the ice.

"While we were there for longer than expected, we were in Antarctica and that's really all that mattered," expedition doctor Andrew Peacock told the ABC.

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