

Australian icebreaker runs aground in Antarctica

February 25 2016, by Martin Parry



Australia's flagship icebreaker the Aurora Australis running aground at Mawson Station in Antarctica

A ferocious blizzard was Thursday hampering attempts to rescue 68 expeditioners and crew stranded on Australia's flagship icebreaker Aurora Australis after it broke its mooring and ran aground in frozen

Antarctica.

The Australian Antarctic Division (AAD) said the incident happened on Wednesday when the ship was on a resupply mission to the Mawson Station, with gales of more than 130 kilometres per hour (80 miles per hour) whipping the base.

"A total of 68 expeditioners and crew are on board, and all remain safe and well," it said, adding that the icebreaker ran aground at West Arm in Horseshoe Harbour.

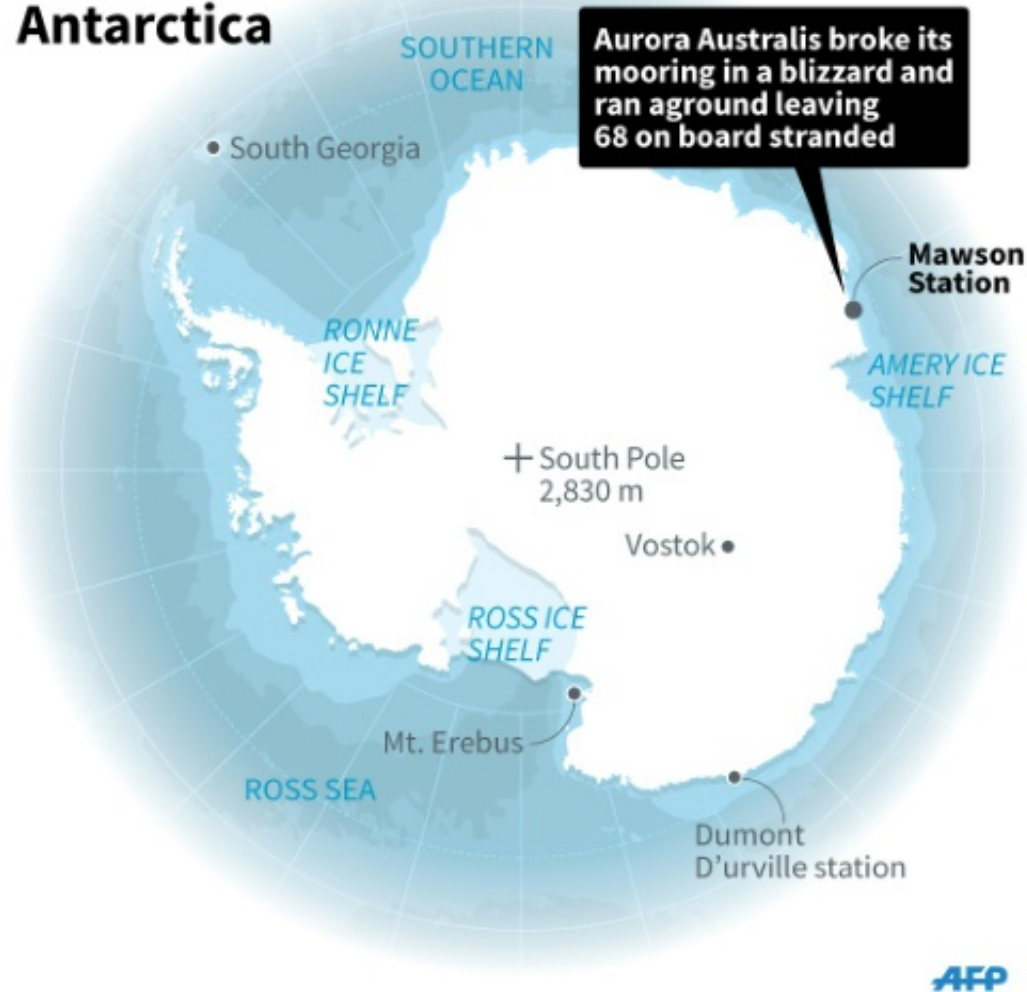
Australian Antarctic Division director Nick Gales said they would only be transferred the short distance to Mawson when conditions improved.

"They will remain on the ship until conditions ease and it's safe to move them over to Mawson Station," he said. "We're thinking that conditions are going to ease overnight."

The blizzard conditions have been hindering a full assessment of the ship but the division said there was a breach in the hull "into a space that is usually flooded with ballast water".

"This breach has occurred in an area of the ship that poses no risk to the stability of the vessel or of fuel leaking into the environment," it said.

Australian ship stuck in Antarctica



Map showing Mawson Station in Antarctica where an Australian ship ran aground leaving 68 on board stranded.

"Attempts to refloat the vessel will occur when the weather conditions ease. It will take a minimum of three days for the ship's crew to complete a full assessment of the ship once the vessel is afloat again."

The Aurora's grounding means it will not be able to pick up 30 expeditioners waiting for it at another Australian research base, Davis,

who were due to join the ship for the voyage back to Australia.

The AAD said the US Antarctic programme had offered assistance and was flying in a LC130 aircraft to get them to the Casey Station where a bigger plane can land in the coming days to transport them out.

Gales said various contingencies were also being looked at for those on the Aurora.



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"We're in regular touch with the operators of the other national programs so we're looking at ship and aviation options. It's too early to say whether we need those options and secondly which of those will prove the most

effective to get people home quickly," he said.

Ageing vessel

A Chinese Antarctic ship, Xiao Long, recently left Casey and is reportedly within a few days of Mawson.

The Aurora Australis was involved in a dramatic rescue of its own two years ago when it and Chinese icebreaker Xue Long were diverted to help Russian ship, the Akademik Shokalskiy, which was trapped in frozen Antarctic seas.



The ageing vessel has been battling the stormy Southern Ocean since 1989 and is scheduled to be replaced in 2019

The Shokalskiy's 52 passengers were eventually transferred by helicopter to the Aurora Australis, which steamed back to Hobart, forcing a two-week disruption to its schedule.

In the meantime, the Xue Long also became stuck, before both [ships](#) eventually freed themselves.

Australia has four stations in the Antarctic wilderness and Aurora Australis routinely travels from the Australian city of Hobart on scientific and resupply voyages.

The ship, which is owned by P&O Maritime Services, left Hobart on January 11 on its latest mission, undertaking marine science work around the Kerguelen Plateau region before arriving at Mawson last Saturday.

The ageing vessel has been battling the stormy Southern Ocean since 1989 and is scheduled to be replaced in 2019 by a new custom-built ship that will be faster, bigger and offer increased endurance.

Several countries have territorial claims on Antarctica, viewed as a potential future source of huge mineral resources, although under a 1959 agreement the frozen continent is designated a scientific preserve.

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