

Australian icebreaker home for repairs after Antarctica grounding

March 13 2016

Australia's flagship icebreaker has arrived home for repairs after running aground in Antarctica, as the government thanked international teams from China, Japan and the United States for helping to evacuate the expeditioners on board.

The Aurora Australis broke its mooring in a raging blizzard and ran aground at Horseshoe Harbour close to Australia's Mawson station on February 24, stranding 68 people on board.

The icebreaker was eventually refloated and left Antarctica on March 2, arriving at the West Australian port of Fremantle on Saturday, Environment Minister Greg Hunt said, where it is expected to undergo repairs for hull damage.

Hunt thanked the Chinese, Japanese and US Antarctica programmes for diverting from their own missions by supplying planes and moving expeditioners to help those who had been stranded.

"The assistance offered by all three Antarctic programmes is greatly appreciated as were the many other offers of support from other countries," Hunt said in a statement Saturday.

"Antarctica is a hostile, remote and inherently dangerous environment and international cooperation is vital for our dedicated Antarctic teams to be able to carry out their important work."

The expeditioners are due to be flown back to Australia in the next few days, Hunt added.

The ageing Aurora Australis, which is owned by P&O Maritime Services, 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 1949 agreement the frozen continent is designated a scientific preserve.

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