

Battle to stop blazing tanker from hitting Sri Lanka coast

September 4 2020, by Amal Jayasinghe



The Panamanian-registered New Diamond was carrying 270,000 tonnes of crude from Kuwait to India when the engine room exploded on Thursday killing one Filipino crew member

Tugboats battled into the night Friday to stop a blazing oil tanker

carrying 270,000 tonnes of crude from drifting towards the Sri Lankan coast.

The fire on the Panamanian-registered New Diamond had been brought under control, according to the Indian coastguard. But smoke was still pouring from the 330 metre (1,000 foot) long vessel after an engine-room explosion set off the emergency.

The New Diamond was heading for the eastern Indian port of Paradip from Kuwait when it issued a distress signal 60 kilometres (37 miles) from Sri Lanka's east coast.

With one Filipino crew member killed in the explosion and the 22 others taken off, the tanker drifted 25 km closer to the coast on Friday.

Three tugboats—two Indian and one chartered by the owners—were brought into action in a bid to push the vessel back into [deeper waters](#) at sea.

The Indian Coast Guard (ICG) said late Friday that the fire had been brought "under control" through a "massive firefighting effort" by its vessels with the Indian navy and ships and aircraft from the Sri Lankan military.

Water and foam cannons were used to smother the flames, Sri Lanka's Disaster Management Centre chief Sudantha Ranasinghe said.



Sri Lankan navy officers carry an injured crewman from the stricken oil tanker, the New Diamond

"The flames on the bridge and outside the engine have been put out," Ranasinghe told AFP before the Indian coast guard announcement. But he said fires were still burning inside the ship.

Ranasinghe said the blaze had not spread to the massive crude cargo and 1,700 tonnes of diesel fuel.

The Sri Lankan navy said there was no immediate danger of the tanker breaking up, despite reports of a two-metre (six-foot) crack in the hull above the water line.

Rear Admiral Y. N. Jayarathna said the metal had cracked in the intense heat as the ship's diesel fuel tanks burned when the fire spread from the adjoining engine room.

The emergency came just a week after a huge oil slick hit the Mauritius coast.

"It will take another four to five days to completely put out the fire," Jayarathna said. "Thereafter we should be able to tow it away and let the owners decide what they want to do."

The head of Sri Lanka's Marine Environment Protection Agency Dharshani Lahandapura said legal action could be taken against the owners, Liberian-registered Porto Emporios Shipping Inc "should the worst happen and the ship breaks up."



The New Diamond is carrying 270,000 tonnes of crude

Lahandapura told reporters that Sri Lanka did not have the resources to contain a [major oil spill](#).

But Ranasinghe said authorities were considering a ship-to-ship transfer of the crude before salvaging the tanker.

Maldives fears disaster

The vessel is larger than the Japanese bulk carrier MV Wakashio, which crashed into a reef in Mauritius in July leaking more than 1,000 tonnes of oil into the island nation's pristine waters.

Sri Lanka's neighbour Maldives has raised concerns that any oil spill from the New Diamond could cause serious environmental damage in the atoll of 1,192 coral islands that depends on fisheries and tourism.

Maldivian minister at the president's office, Ahmed Naseem, called for precautionary measures across the archipelago that is about 1,000 kilometres southwest of Sri Lanka.

"Maldives needs to watch this oil spill carefully and take all precautions to prevent it from reaching her shores," Naseem said on Twitter. "This could be a major disaster."

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