

Rescued Antarctic group due in Australia in two weeks

7 January 2014

A group of scientists, tourists and journalists rescued by helicopter from their icebound ship in Antarctica is due back in Australia in a fortnight, officials said Tuesday.

The 52 passengers, who spent Christmas and New Year stranded by thick ice in Antarctica's Commonwealth Bay, were expected to arrive at Australia's Casey research base Tuesday night on board the resupply ship Aurora Australis, according to Australia's Antarctic Division (AAD).

They were rescued from the marooned Russian research vessel, Akademik Shokalskiy, last Thursday, using a helicopter from Chinese icebreaker Xue Long to ferry them to the Aurora.

AAD director Tony Fleming said the Aurora was expected to dock at southern Australia's Hobart city on January 22, returning the passengers to dry land some three weeks later than they were originally due to disembark in New Zealand.

First, the Australian ship is set to complete its original resupply mission at Casey, which was interrupted by the call to help the Shokalskiy some 800 nautical miles away.

"This will include discharging the remaining cargo and loading material for return to Australia," said Fleming.

"It will unload about 500,000 litres of fuel and, if weather conditions permit, hopefully allow the completion of some programmes interrupted when the ship was diverted on its rescue mission."

The Shokalskiy's passengers—22 scientists, 26 paying passengers and four journalists—would remain on board during resupply operations, with the Aurora scheduled to depart Antarctica for Australia on January 13.

Fleming said the Australian ship was now running

two weeks behind schedule, which "will mean delays to the rest of the season".

"It has been a dynamic season and we have faced a range of challenges but have been able to complete a number of programmes which is a credit to all involved," he said.

The Shokalskiy's expedition, "Spirit of Mawson", has been criticised after several government vessels were diverted from Antarctic programmes to go to their aid including the Aurora, Xue Long, France's Astrolabe, and US Coast Guard ship Polar Star.

The Russian ship remains stranded in the ice with 22 crew on board, and the Xue Long is now also surrounded by impenetrable floes. The Polar Star departed Sydney on Sunday to go to their rescue, and is expected to arrive in the area this weekend.

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