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Ship fire off Colombo: Indian Coast Guard rushes assets, more on standby

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Based on Sri Lanka's request, the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) has tasked offshore patrol vessels ICGS Vaibhav and Vajra towards Colombo in Sri Lanka, to bolster firefighting, pollution response efforts on MV X-Press Pearl, a container ship that is ablaze. A major fire broke out on the ship on Tuesday morning, following an explosion, that is reportedly caused by the collapse of containers due to rough weather. The container ship that was on its way from Hazira to Colombo, was anchored about nine nautical miles (about 16kms) off Sri Lanka's major port city.

The ship was carrying 1486 containers and about 25 tons of hazardous nitric acid and other chemicals. So far, the 25 crew onboard the ship, including five Indians have been evacuated. It was on 20th May, Thursday that fire first broke out on the said ship, following which it was brought under control by Sri Lankan Port authorities by the next day.

However, on Tuesday morning, owing to rough weather nearly 10 containers are said to have fallen overboard after the explosion and resultant fire. The 325 metric tons of fuels held in the large container vessels tanks are feared to pose a threat of oil spill in the region.

Besides the two ICG vessels headed for the site of the fire, their formations at Kochi, Chennai and Tuticorin are on standby for immediate assistance towards Pollution Response. ICG is in continuous coordination and communication with Srilankan authorities for the operation. ICG aircraft are also being brought to Tuticorin from Chennai and Koch for aerial surveillance and pollution response.

Over the last ten days week, the Indian Coast guard and the Indian Navy have been engaged in monitoring, search and rescue operations across India's West Coast, that was struck by a very severe cyclone 'Tauktae'. The effects of this cyclone were felt in Lakshadweep islands, Kerala, South Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Goa, and in Gujarat where it made landfall. Currently, the ICG assets are also deployed for search and rescue, any eventuality that may arise from the impact of Cyclone Yaas that is predicted to make landfall on India's East Coast between Odisha and West Bengal.

In Sep 2020, a major fire had broken onboard MT New Diamond, which was carrying about 2.7 lakh metric ton oil and positioned off the eastern coast of Sri Lanka. Mammoth efforts by the Indian Coast guard in coordination with other agencies ensured that the blaze was brought under control, without any instances of the oil spill. The ICG has said that, as an active member of the South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP), it remains committed to its responsibilities of safeguarding the ocean environment in the region.