

Ship on fire off Colombo: Indian coastguard rushes on assets, more on hold

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Based on Sri Lanka's request, the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) tasked ICGS offshore patrol vessels Vaibhav and Vajra to Colombo in Sri Lanka, to step up fire and pollution control efforts on the MV X-Press Pearl, a container ship on fire. A major fire broke out on the ship Tuesday morning, following an explosion, believed to have been caused by collapsing containers due to bad weather. The container ship from Hazira to Colombo was anchored about nine nautical miles (about 16 km) off the coast of Sri Lanka's main port city.

The ship was carrying 1,486 containers and approximately 25 tonnes of hazardous nitric acid and other chemicals. So far, the 25 crew on board the ship, including five Indians, have been evacuated. It was on May 20, Thursday, that the fire first broke out on the said vessel, after which it was brought under control by the Sri Lankan port authorities the following day.

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However, on Tuesday morning, due to bad weather, nearly 10 containers were reported to have fallen overboard after the explosion and resulting fire. There are concerns that the 325 metric tonnes of fuel kept in the tanks of large container ships poses a threat of an oil spill in the region.

In addition to the two ICG ships that have made their way to the fire site, their formations in Kochi, Chennai and Tuticorin are awaiting immediate assistance in combating pollution. ICG is in continuous coordination and communication with the Sri Lankan authorities for the operation. ICG planes are also brought to Tuticorin from Chennai and Koch for aerial surveillance and pollution control.

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During the last ten days of the week, the Indian Coast Guard and Indian Navy engaged in surveillance, search and rescue operations on the west coast of India, which was hit by a severe cyclone. serious "Tauktae". The effects of this cyclone were felt in the Lakshadweep Islands, Kerala, southern Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Goa and Gujarat where it made landfall. Currently, ICG resources are also deployed for search and rescue, any eventuality that may arise from the impact of Cyclone Yaas which is expected to make landfall on the east coast of India between Odisha and West Bengal.

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In September 2020, a major fire broke out aboard the MT New Diamond, which was carrying around 2.7 lakh of oil and positioned off the east coast of Sri Lanka. The gigantic efforts of the Indian Coast Guard in coordination with other agencies brought the blaze under control, without any case of an oil spill. The ICG said that as an active member of the South Asia Cooperative Environment Program (SACEP), it remains committed to its responsibilities of safeguarding the ocean environment in the region.

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