

Search and Rescue and Environmental Issues in the Antarctic

Information Paper Submitted by New Zealand

New Zealand has responsibility for Search and Rescue coordination within the Ross Sea area where Japanese vessels were whaling from December 2006 – February 2007¹.

Because of these responsibilities, New Zealand contacted the two non-government organisations that were sending vessels to the Antarctic (Greenpeace and the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society) and the government of Japan in advance of the 2006/2007 season of Japan's whale research programme in the Antarctic (JARPA II). New Zealand urged all parties to exercise restraint, follow the International Regulations for the Prevention of Collisions at Sea, and respect the International Whaling Commission resolution on the safety of vessels engaged in whaling and whale research-related activities, agreed by consensus at IWC 58 (Resolution 2006/2). New Zealand also stressed to all parties that the Antarctic was one of the most isolated and dangerous places on earth and that New Zealand's search and rescue capacity in this region was limited.

Over the course of the JARPA II whaling season, New Zealand responded to distress calls related to four incidents: a seriously ill crew member needing medical evacuation from one of the Japanese vessels; two Sea Shepherd Conservation Society crew members lost at sea in heavy fog in an inflatable boat for several hours; confrontations between two Sea Shepherd vessels and a Japanese vessel; and a fatal fire on board the Japanese whaling fleet factory ship, the *Nisshin Maru*.

New Zealand is concerned about any serious maritime incident in the Antarctic Treaty area. Given the fragility of the Antarctic environment, any such incident risks jeopardising vulnerable Antarctic ecosystems and compromising the intrinsic value of Antarctica.

During the *Nisshin Maru* incident, a number of Antarctic Treaty Parties approached New Zealand for information on what was happening. New Zealand prepared a factual information paper for the 30th Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting detailing the operational steps that New Zealand undertook during the incident (copy attached).

The *Nisshin Maru* incident was raised by New Zealand at the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM) in New Delhi in May 2007. New Zealand noted its concern that the incident could have led to an environmental emergency in the Antarctic Treaty area. The Report of the ATCM notes that several parties thanked New Zealand for the information provided. Japan thanked New Zealand and the United States for their work during the incident, and informed the ATCM that there were no oil spills or explosions during the incident. Japan also noted that it was investigating the cause of the fire to prevent such incidents recurring in the future. The United Kingdom stated it would like to be informed of the lessons that could be learned from this incident at the next ATCM based on the results of the maritime inquiry being held by Japan.

¹ As a Party to the 1974 International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) and its 1978 and 1988 Protocols, the 1979 International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue and the 1944 Convention on Civil Aviation

XXX ATCM
Information Paper
Agenda Item: ATCM 15
New Zealand
Original: English

Fire on Board the Japanese Whaling Vessel *Nisshin Maru*

Information Paper submitted by New Zealand

Introduction: New Zealand's Search and Rescue Responsibilities in the Antarctic Treaty Area:

As a Party to the 1974 International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) and its 1978 and 1988 Protocols, the 1979 International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue and the 1944 Convention on Civil Aviation, New Zealand has undertaken to provide aeronautical and maritime Search and Rescue co-ordination and certain services within a part of the Antarctic Treaty area including the Ross Sea.

The New Zealand Search and Rescue Region (NZSRR) is that defined by the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO). It includes all that area bounded on the west by meridian 163E, on the east by meridian 131W, extending south to the South Pole and bounded on the north by a line joining 25S 163E, 25 S 180E, 05S 171W, 05S 157W, 30S 157W, 30S 131W. The ICAO defined NZSRR incorporates the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) defined NZSRR which differs only in the north-west corner adjacent to the New Caledonia Sub-Flight Information Region.

***Nisshin Maru* Incident: Outline**

On Thursday 15 February 2007 at 5.33am New Zealand time², New Zealand's Rescue Coordination Centre (RCCNZ) was advised that the Japanese-flagged whaling vessel *Nisshin Maru* was on fire following an explosion and that a crew member was missing.

The vessel's advised position was 73.38 degrees South and 178.56 degrees East, approximately 200 nautical miles off Cape Adare. Weather in the vicinity was calm at the time.

At 5.59am the vessel *Esperanza* contacted the RCCNZ reporting it had received a distress call from MMSI 431683000 via DSC. *Esperanza* gave its position as 700nm from the distress position with an ETA of 48 hours. As *Esperanza* was the closest known vessel at the time RCCNZ requested *Esperanza* to proceed at best possible speed.

At 7.21am *Esperanza* was stood down by the RCCNZ as other vessels closer to the distress position had been found.

At 6.30pm the Master of the *Nisshin Maru* reported that six fire-fighters had re-entered the factory deck but had been unable to extinguish the fire and that the compartment had been resealed.

On Friday 16 February the Master cancelled *Nisshin Maru*'s 'Mayday' distress call. He reported the compartment containing the fire remained sealed and that the main power distribution board had burnt out. The vessel was unable to start its main engines. The tanker *Oriental Bluebird* and whaling vessel *Yushin Maru No 2* were rafted alongside. The vessels' position was 280 nautical miles North East of Scott Base. At 3pm on 16 February the Master reported that the crew was continuing to fight the fire and endeavouring to starve it of oxygen.

On 16 February the United States Antarctic Program (USAP) confirmed that it was standing by, in response to a request from the New Zealand Government, to conduct an overflight with an LC-130 aircraft from McMurdo Station in order to obtain photographs of the vessel and its condition. The USAP also confirmed that the US Coast Guard icebreaker *Polar Sea* was in the vicinity and available to assist.

On 16 February Greenpeace sent a letter to the Minister of Conservation "to inform the New Zealand Government of the intention of the *Esperanza* to offer assistance to the *Nisshin Maru* and take it under tow if required."

² All date and time references in this paper refer to New Zealand time.

Greenpeace also indicated it would also be notifying the Antarctic Treaty Secretariat, the Japanese Government and the Netherlands Government.

On Saturday 17 February at 9am the Master of the *Nisshin Maru* reported the crew was continuing to fight the fire and that it was his intention to keep the fire compartment sealed for the next 6 to 24 hours until the fire was extinguished.

At 9.16am the US Coast Guard icebreaker *Polar Sea* arrived on the scene and conducted a sweep around the *Nisshin Maru* at approximately 300 yards. *Polar Sea* reported there was no visible sheen on the water and no obvious external damage. *Polar Sea* subsequently departed en route to Hobart.

At 1.35pm the Master of the *Nisshin Maru* reported fire-fighters had re-entered the fire compartment wearing breathing apparatus and were endeavouring to extinguish the residual fires, and that the body of the missing crew member had been found. At 4.30pm the Master reported the crew had re-entered the engine room and had begun work to restart the main engines.

On Sunday 18 February at 5.30pm the Master reported that engineers had managed to start one electrical generator and that their assessment of the main engines was that they appeared undamaged.

On Monday 19 February at 9.45am the Master reported that the fire was out and that his main priority was to restart the main engines.

At 5.00pm the Master reported the ship had two generators working for electrical power, heating and lighting. He estimated work to restart the main engines would take two to three days and reported that as a contingency, engineers were also working on preparations for a deep-sea tow.

On Thursday 22 February the Master reported that engineers continued to work on the main engines.

On Friday 23 February the Master reported engineers were still working on the main engines. No indication was given of when the vessel would be ready to move. Vessels alongside or in the vicinity included *Oriental Bluebird*, *Yushin Maru*, *Yushin Maru No 2*, *Kaiko Maru*, *Kyo Maru No 1* and *Esperanza*.

On Sunday 25 February at 4pm the Master reported that *Nisshin Maru* was underway and travelling north with the main engines having been restarted at 10.30pm on 24 February. The vessel's reported position was 200 nautical miles from the scene of the incident.

On Thursday 1 March at 8.30am the Master reported that testing of the main engines had been completed and that they were in good condition. The vessel's position was stated as 60.6S 178.19E. He thanked RCCNZ for their assistance and indicated he would not be reporting again.

Communications:

Although the Master of the *Nisshin Maru* cancelled his distress call on 16 February the RCCNZ maintained communications with the vessel until shortly before its departure from the Antarctic Treaty area. Japanese interpreters were engaged by the Centre to assist with communications. Representatives of the Embassy of Japan in Wellington were also invited to the Centre and two Embassy officers were assigned to this task.

Official Contacts:

Throughout the incident regular contact was maintained with the Japanese authorities both through the Embassy of Japan in Wellington and the New Zealand Embassy in Tokyo. New Zealand signalled its concern about the potential for an environmental emergency arising from the disablement of the *Nisshin Maru* and urged the vessel's removal from the Antarctic Treaty area as soon as possible.

New Zealand would like to record its gratitude to the United States Government for the assistance rendered by the United States Antarctic Programme including its confirmation of the availability of an aircraft from McMurdo Station to conduct an overflight and the deployment of the US Coast Guard icebreaker *Polar Sea* to monitor and report on the incident.

Finally New Zealand notes that it received a number of requests for information from other Consultative Parties during the incident which it endeavoured to respond to as fully as possible on the basis of the information available at the time. The New Zealand Delegation hopes that this paper provides further useful information to the Parties.