

<http://www.ens-newswire.com/ens/feb2007/2007-02-26-02.asp>

Japanese Whaler Restarts Engines, Moves Away From Antarctica

WELLINGTON, New Zealand, February 26, 2007 (ENS) - The Japanese whaling vessel Nisshin Maru restarted its engines and departed the Ross Sea Sunday, 10 days after a fire disabled the ship and claimed the life of one crew member.

The Nisshin Maru is the mother ship of a whaling fleet run by the Institute of Cetacean Research, an organization based in Tokyo and affiliated with the Japanese government. Two other vessels of the fleet accompanied the Nisshin Maru northward.

The removal of the ship alleviated fears expressed by the New Zealand government that fuel oil or toxic chemicals would be spilled, contaminating one of the largest penguin colonies in the Antarctic.

Dr. Hiroshi Hatanaka, director general of the Institute of Cetacean Research, said that crew had worked tirelessly day and night to restore the vessel to working order since the February 15 fire.

On the move again, the Nisshin Maru, right, steams away from the Greenpeace ship Esperanza, in the Ross Sea. February 25, 2007. (Photo courtesy Institute of Cetacean Research)

More than 125 people were evacuated from the vessel when the fire broke out, leaving a crew of about 30 who extinguished the fire and repaired the vessel's electrical system and engines.

"The Nisshin Maru had to pass all the necessary requirements the skipper needed to be done before she could depart the Ross Sea, and we need some more time for adjustment and testing of the Nisshin Maru's equipment," Hatanaka said. "It has been our goal to get the Nisshin Maru underway as soon as possible, but in a way that ensured the safety of everyone involved."

He said there was never any indication that the Antarctic environment was in any way under threat from the accident, despite regular accusations to the contrary from Greenpeace and the New Zealand Conservation Minister Chris Carter.

"Minister Carter's continued claims that toxic chemicals could leak from the ship and Greenpeace's wild and slanted accusations that the damage was too great to fix, that the vessel needed an immediate tow by them, or that the engines were too damaged to work were all false then and remain false now," said Hatanaka. "The crew acted very responsibly and are to be congratulated for their efforts in ensuring an excellent outcome."

One of the two whaling ships that stayed with the Nisshin Maru is a fueling tanker. All three ships were refueled Sunday and began moving north.

Greenpeacers aboard their ship Esperanza say they will "escort" the Nisshin Maru out of the Southern Whale Sanctuary, but Institute continues to reject any involvement with the environmental group.

The crew of the Esperanza displays a banner demanding an end to whaling as the Japanese fleet prepares to depart the Southern Ocean. (Photo courtesy Greenpeace)

The Esperanza arrived at the location in the Ross Sea on February 17, after receiving a distress call from the Nisshin Maru. But since then, the Japanese have not accepted the Greenpeace offer of a tow away from the environmentally sensitive Antarctic coast, nor any other assistance from the Greenpeace vessel.

Greenpeace spokeswoman Melanie Duchen says the Esperanza now is about 10 kilometers (six miles) behind the Japanese fleet. She says they will leave the whaling fleet at the border of the Antarctic Whale Sanctuary.

The Japanese have not stated clearly whether or not the fleet will resume whaling, which they maintain is being conducted for research. The Japanese announced a self-imposed quota of 935 minke whales and 10 endangered fin whales this year.

New Zealand Conservation Minister Chris Carter says he has been assured by the Japanese Ambassador that the fleet would not resume whaling, and says he can only accept the ambassador's word.

He hopes the "loss of face" the fire has caused will encourage the Japanese to stop whaling.

But Institute spokesman Glenn Inwood, a New Zealander based in Japan, told the "New Zealand Herald" Sunday it is "likely they would stay and carry on whaling."

The Japanese position is that the Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission agreed in 1990 that there were 760,000 Minke whales in the Antarctic Ocean as a result of a comprehensive evaluation of Minke whale resources.

In 1992, the committee calculated that an annual catch of two thousand to four thousand Antarctic Minke whales for 100 years would not adversely affect the stock, the Japanese say.

Greenpeace has threatened what it calls "peaceful direct action" if the Nisshin Maru resumes whaling.

Captain Paul Watson of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society who confronted the Nisshin Maru earlier this month in the Antarctic Whale Sanctuary says the ship is "limping" north and its whaling season is over.

"The Nisshin Maru is severely damaged," Watson said today. "The main engine was started but electrical systems are barely functioning. The whale processing equipment is ruined. The winches used to haul up the whales are inoperable. The cargo of whale meat onboard has been partially if not completely spoiled by loss of refrigeration and intense heat. In addition, the whale meat has been contaminated by chemicals used to fight the blaze and spilt during the fire."

"What Japan has just demonstrated over the last 10 days," said Watson, "is a total contempt for international concerns for the environmental protection of Antarctic wildlife. This whaling fleet is an ecological time-bomb. The potential for disaster is a real and ever present danger when they are down in the Whale Sanctuary illegally slaughtering endangered whales."

The Sea Shepherd ships Robert Hunter and Farley Mowat are now docked in Melbourne, Australia. Preparations have already begun to outfit a campaign to intervene against the possibility of a return of the whaling fleet in December.