Antarctic accidents pile pressure on London talks for restricted polar travel

By Caroline Gammell (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/caroline-gammell/)

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The International Maritime Organization (IMO), based in the capital, has been considering a mandatory Polar Code for several months.

However, the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition said it was “imperative” for a decision to be made quickly to prevent any more environmental disasters.

On December 13, the South Korean fishing trawler, the No 1 In Sung, sank in calm waters in the Ross Sea, Southern Ocean.

Twenty three people died and 20 people had to be rescued when the 31-year-old vessel got into trouble. It is thought she may have hit an iceberg, but no distress signal was sent out. A few days earlier, the New York-operated Clelia II cruise ship lost an engine during stormy weather in the Drake passage, south of Argentina. She suffered an electrical failure after a large wave crashed over the bridge and smashed a window.

The crew was forced to radio for help and the Clelia II was aided by the National Geographic Explorer which escorted her until repairs could be made.

A year earlier, the Clelia II ran aground on the Antarctica Peninsula and had to be pulled off the rocks by its sister ship, the Corinthian II.

In 2007, the 2,400 tonne liner the MV Explorer – with 24 Britons on board – sank in the Drake Passage and all 150 passengers and crew had to be evacuated.

The Explorer hit an iceberg and took four hours to sink 75 miles north of the Antarctic Peninsula.

Sian Prior, from Asoc, said: “These recent events serve as a demonstration of the importance and urgency of developing legally-binding regulation to ensure the highest standards of safety and environmental protection are applied to vessels operating in these remote and hazardous oceans.

“The need for higher standards of safety to protect both human lives and the environment is imperative.

“It is important that the work is concluded in 2012 so that the provisions can be introduced for vessels operating in polar waters as soon as possible.”
The number of people visiting the Antarctic has shot up from 7,500 10 years ago to around 33,000 each year.

Asoc wants the Polar Code restrictions to apply to all ships and not just cruise ships and new vessels.

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