

Air Drop for Ship Stuck in Antarctica

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WELLINGTON, New Zealand — A New Zealand air force cargo plane flew to Antarctica on Wednesday to parachute sea pumps and hull patches to a leaking Russian fishing vessel that had been stuck in the frigid waters after striking sea ice last week.

The vessel Sparta, with 32 crew aboard, hit underwater ice Friday that tore a 30-centimeter hole in its hull and caused it to list at 13 degrees. Rescue ships, hampered by heavy sea ice, were still several days away from the Ross Sea shelf area of northern Antarctica where the stricken ship sits immobilized.

Maritime New Zealand, which is coordinating rescue attempts, said Wednesday that this second air drop of vital pumps and patches will help the crew in its fight to keep the ship afloat.

Rescue Coordination Center spokesman Ross Henderson confirmed the successful drop of three pallets of equipment by a New Zealand Defense Force C-130 Hercules plane onto the ice near the stricken vessel mid-afternoon Wednesday.

"The crew will now recover the equipment and focus on making more permanent repairs

to the hole in the side of the ship," he said in a statement.

Search and rescue mission coordinator John Dickson said the crew's efforts over the past few days meant the vessel was now back on an even keel and "the crew only needs to resume pumping occasionally to keep ahead of the water ingress."

Weather conditions in the area were reasonably good, with occasional snow showers and clouds, but were forecast to worsen Thursday, Dickson said.

The crew is made up of 15 Russians, 16 Indonesians and one Ukrainian, the agency said.

Several nearby vessels have been tasked by the rescue center with trying to reach the Sparta to assist its crew.

Dickson said the Norwegian vessel Seljavaer was heading away from the stranded vessel in an attempt to navigate a path around heavy ice, while the Sparta's sister ship, the Chiyo Maru No. 3, is still some 160 kilometers away.

The ice-strengthened polar research vessel Araon is estimated to arrive in the area on Dec. 26, he said.

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