

Beat: News

Vessels trapped in Antarctic sea ice break free, head for open waters

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USPA News - A Russian cruise ship that was mostly evacuated last week after it got stuck in sea ice in Antarctica broke free late on Tuesday and began moving towards open waters, Australian officials said. A Chinese vessel that also got stuck after participating in the rescue operation has also broken free.

The captain of the MV Akademik Shokalskiy reported at approximately 8 p.m. Australian Eastern Daylight Time (AEDT) on Tuesday that an opening had emerged in the ice after the wind changed direction. It allowed the Russian vessel - which still has 22 crew members on board - to successfully clear the area containing the heaviest ice and begin making slow progress north through lighter ice conditions. The Chinese research vessel Xue Long, which initially went to the area to rescue the Russian vessel but later became trapped in sea ice as well, broke free at about 9 p.m. AEDT. The captain informed the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) that they too were now making slow progress through lighter ice conditions. "Rescue Coordination Center (RCC) Australia has advised the captains of both vessels to attempt to reach open waters and advise the RCC once clear of the ice field," an AMSA spokesperson said early Wednesday, adding that the Xue Long had advised it no longer required assistance. The U.S. Coast Guard icebreaker Polar Star, which was sent to rescue the trapped vessels, will continue to head towards the area until both ships are free of the ice field and no longer in danger. "The Akademik Shokalskiy continues to move through the ice field and RCC Australia is awaiting confirmation that it does not require any further assistance," AMSA added. The MV Akademik Shokalskiy became beset by ice on early Christmas morning when the vessel was approximately 1,500 nautical miles (2,778 kilometers) south of the Australian island state of Tasmania. The former research ship was on an Antarctic cruise, carrying 74 people, to retrace the footsteps of Australian Antarctic explorer Douglas Mawson more than 100 years ago. All 52 passengers, along with their luggage and some equipment, were rescued by a helicopter from Xue Long on Thursday evening and flown to the Australian icebreaker Aurora Australis. That vessel is now heading towards a base to complete a resupply before heading to Australia, where they are not expected to arrive until later this month. Throughout the ordeal, however, none of the passengers and crew members were ever in any acute danger as they had supplies lasting for several weeks.

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