

Iran says UK-flagged tanker 'ignored distress call', taken to Bander Abbas

20/07/2019 19:42 by admin

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British oil tanker Stena Impero at unknown location, which is believed to have been captured by Iran. (AP/PTI)

Geneva: Iran has taken a British-flagged oil tanker it seized in the Strait of Hormuz to Bandar Abbas port, where it and its crew will remain while an investigation into the vessel's conduct is carried out, Iran's Fars news agency said on Saturday.

The Stena Impero was in an accident with an Iranian fishing boat whose distress call it ignored, the agency quoted the head of Ports and Maritime Organisation in southern Hormozgan province, Allahmorad Afifipour, as saying.

It was taken to Bander Abbas, situated on Iran's southern coast and facing the strait. "All its 23 crew members will remain on the ship until the probe is over," Afifipour said. The 23 crew comprised 18 Indian nationals and five others of other nationalities, he said.

The tanker's operator, Stena Bulk, said on Friday the ship had been "in full compliance with all navigation and international regulations", but was no longer under the crew's control and could not be contacted.

Britain's foreign minister Jeremy Hunt said on Friday it would respond to the seizure in a "considered but robust" way and was as urgently seeking information about the vessel.

No one was immediately available for comment at the Foreign Office early on Saturday.

The vessel had been heading to a port in Saudi Arabia and suddenly changed course after passing through the strait at the mouth of the Gulf, through which a fifth of the world's oil supplies pass.

Already strained relations between Iran and the West have become increasingly fraught since the British navy seized Iran's Grace 1 tanker in Gibraltar on July 4 on suspicion of smuggling oil to Syria in breach of EU sanctions.

Hunt warned of "serious consequences" if the Stena Impero's situation was not resolved quickly. Britain was however "not looking at military options. We are looking at a diplomatic way to resolve the situation," he told reporters.

U.S. President Donald Trump said he would talk to Britain about Friday's seizure, which drove oil prices up above \$62 a barrel.

The United States has blamed Iran for a series of attacks since mid-May on shipping around the Strait of Hormuz. Tehran rejects the allegations.

The incidents have increased international concern that both sides could blunder into a war in the strategic waterway.

The United States is sending military personnel and resources to Saudi Arabia for the first time since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 in response to the escalating tensions.

Relations between Washington and Tehran worsened last year when Trump abandoned a 2015 nuclear deal between world powers and Iran. Under the pact, Iran agreed to restrict nuclear work, long seen by the West as a cover for developing atomic bombs, in return for lifting sanctions. But sanctions have been imposed again, badly hurting Iran's economy.

- Reuters