MSDF destroyer runs over fishing boat; 2 missing

Crew members tell the Defense Ministry that they saw the fishing vessel too late.

The Asahi Shimbun

A father and son remained missing in waters off the Boso Peninsula on Tuesday afternoon after the Maritime Self-Defense Force Aegis destroyer Atago sliced through their fishing vessel in the morning.

Cutters from the 3rd Regional Coast Guard Head-quarter as well as MSDF ships and helicopters were dispatched to search for Haruo Eiichiro, 58, and his son, Tsutomu, 23.

According to Coast Guard and MSDF officials, the Atago contacted the Coast Guard around 4:23 a.m. and said the destroyer had collided with a fishing boat at 4:07 a.m. about 40 kilometers south-southwest from Nohojima, Chiba Prefecture, at the tip of the Boso Peninsula.

The fishing vessel Seikou 478, which was split in half, Atago crew members searched the area for survivors but were unable to find the two fishermen.

Crew Guard cutters sent to the accident scene searched the two parts of the fishing boat but could find no trace of the two Eiichiros. Only the father's windbreaker was later recovered.

It is regrettable that such an accident has occurred. I extend my deepest sympathy to the families. " the chief of staff of the Ministry of Defense, Eiji Yoshikawa, said. "We will do our utmost in searching for those who were involved on the fishing boat."

According to officials at the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, the Seikou 478 and other fishing boats were heading off the coast of Hachijo Island to catch tuna and mackerel.

The area where the collision occurred was north of the fishing grounds where the Seikou 478 was headed.

MSDF officials said crew members were on watch at the time. They said Atago's radar system was functioning at the time.

Defense Ministry officials said that two minutes before the accident, Atago's crew on watch noticed a green light indicating the fishing boat was on the right of the destroyer.

The Atago was maneuvering to avoid a collision a minute before the actual impact. The fishing boat turned right about 100 meters in front of the Atago, likely to avoid a head-on collision, and the destroyer rammed into the small boat, the officials said.

Crew members told the Defense Ministry that they spotted the fishing boat too late.

The Coast Guard is questioning the crew of the Atago, which docked at the MSDF Yokosuka base late in the afternoon.

Coast Guard officials suspect both the crew of the MSDF vessel and the fishermen of missing the other.

According to MSDF officials, the Atago, which is the fifth Aegis destroyer in the MSDF fleet, has a standard displacement of 7,270 tons. The Atago is 165 meters long and 21 meters wide. It was commissioned in March 2007 and belongs to Escort Flotilla 3 based in Matsuura, Kyoto Prefecture.

The Atago had completed a missile launching exercise in waters off Hawaii and was heading to the Yokosuka base at the time of the collision.

The MSDF has set up an accident investigation committee to look into the cause of the accident.

Defense Minister Shigeru Ishiba has asked the ministry and the MSDF to conduct a full investigation of the accident and related issues.

It took about 90 minutes before the Atago arrived at the site of the accident and about two hours before Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda was told.

"I believe it was impossible to identify the fishing boat that bears political responsibility immediately after the accident, even if it is a fishing flash report," Ishiba told a news conference Tuesday.

Atago crew members inquired about the Japanese Coast Guard at 4:23 a.m. minutes after the collision.

The information reached the Coast Guard Staff Office at 4:40 a.m. and the MSDF chief of staff and the Defense Ministry staff were later informed.

Ishiba was informed at 5:20 a.m. by Noda and Fukuda around 6 p.m.

"When there is a possibility of people involved in an accident being related to the ministry, the minister should immediately be informed," Fukuda told reporters.

Defense Ministry guidelines stipulate that the MSDF chief of staff must inform aides at the ministry and the senior vice minister of an emergency within an hour of its occurrence, ministry sources said.

In Tuesday's accident, the Marine Staff Office operation room received information at 4:40 a.m. but did not contact the minister's aides, instead informed officials of the Bureau of Operational Policy within the ministry around 1 a.m.

The bureau's officials in turn informed Ishiba at 5:40 a.m.

Not only was the defender crew informed late, but the officials did not go through the protocol channels.

The last time a private-sector boat was sunk in an accident an MSDF vessel was sunk in an accident in July 1988, when the submarine Naikou rammed a fishing boat. Thirty people died in the accident.

Experts: Crew likely not keeping proper watch

Attempts to rescue the fishermen may have also been insufficient.

The Asahi Shimbun

Experts on maritime accidents indicated that crew members of the Maritime Self-Defense Force destroyer Atago were responsible for the collision with a fishing boat early Tuesday that left two people missing.

The Atago is equipped with the advanced Aegis radar, but the system is for anti-aircraft purposes.

Yoshikiko Yamada, a lawyer for The Nippon Foundation who has been involved in inquiries into accidents at sea, said the Atago crew members were not aware of the other ship's path, and that the MSDF destroyer likely saw the small ship but neglected to fulfill that obligation.

"It is possible that the MSDF vessel should have avoided the fishing boat but neglected to fulfill that obligation," Yamada said.

The sea was calm and no fog was reported in the area at the time of the accident. Official of the Defense Ministry also acknowledged that visibility was good.

Crew members on the Atago are being asked to keep watch day and night from the bridge while not on duty.

Two crew members on the Atago were called from the bridge to the bridge to have an eye on surrounding areas, according to the ministry's Maritime Staff Office.

Radars are also kept operating while navigating.

"I believe that radar was operating in the area," Ichiro Kamiura, chief of staff of the Maritime Staff Office, said.

Kamiura speculated that the crew of Atago had neglected their duties, and that the crew of Atago had neglected their duties.

Kamiura also said that the Atago's bridge tended to see the fishing boat likely failed to closely watch the other vessels in the vicinity.

Masao Ikeda, an official with the Maritime Rescue Coordinating Center, said rescue operations were launched immediately after the collision, as soon as the ship was reported.

"Crew recovery is made easy if those in the water are in life jackets or are swimmers," he said.

Courses taken by Aegis destroyer and fishing boat

- Nov. 12, 2011: Departs home base of Maizuru.
- Dec. 12, 2011: Departs home base of Maizuru.
- Feb. 9, 2012: Departs home base of Maizuru.
- Feb. 15, 2012: Departs home base of Maizuru.
- March 15, 2012: Departs home base of Maizuru.
- April 13, 2012: Departs home base of Maizuru.
- May 13, 2012: Departs home base of Maizuru.
- June 13, 2012: Departs home base of Maizuru.
- July 13, 2012: Departs home base of Maizuru.

Accident site

- 50 km

Near Hawaii

Accident site

- 50 km

From Hawaii

- 50 km

Boo Peninsula

- 50 km

Nountemari

- 50 km

Shibukawa

- 50 km

Kamikaze

- 50 km

Nokojima

- 50 km

Takamatsu

- 50 km

Kyoto Prefecture

- 50 km

Yokosuka base

- 50 km

Tsuruga

- 50 km

Kawasaki

- 50 km

Osaka

- 50 km

Kobe

- 50 km

Tokyo

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