

The Asahi Shimbun

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MSDF destroyer runs over fishing boat; 2 missing



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

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

Cutters from the 3rd Regional Coast Guard Headquarters as well as MSDF ships and helicopters were dispatched to search for Haruo Kichisei, 58, and his son, Tet-suhiro, 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 Nojimazaki, Chiba Prefecture, at the tip of the Boso Peninsula.

The fishing vessel Seitoku Maru was split in half. Atago crew members searched the area for survivors but were unable to find the two fishermen.

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

"It is very regrettable that

such an accident has occurred, and I extend my deepest apologies to the public," Adm. Eiji Yoshikawa, chief of staff of the MSDF, said. "We will do our utmost in searching for those who were on the fishing boat."

According to officials at the Katsura fisheries office, the Seitoku Maru and other fishing boats were heading off the coast of Hachijojima island to catch tuna and marlin. The area where the collision occurred was north of the fishing grounds where the Seitoku Maru was headed.

MSDF officials said crew members were on watch as usual. They said Atago's radar system was also operating at the time.

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

The Atago started maneuvers to go into reverse 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 ramed into the small boat, the officials said.

Crew members told the Defense Ministry 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 failed to keep a careful watch on where they were heading.

According to MSDF officials, the Atago is the fifth Aegis destroyer in the MSDF fleet. With a standard displacement of 7,750 tons, the Atago is 165 meters long and 21 m wide. It was commissioned in March 2007 and belongs to Escort Flotilla 3 based in Maizuru, 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 also instructed officials at the ministry and the SDF to improve communications.

It took about 90 minutes before Ishiba was informed of the accident and about two hours before Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda was told.

"I believe it was possible to inform the individual who bears political responsibility immediately after the accident, even if it is a brief flash report," Ishiba told a news con-

ference Tuesday.

Atago crew members informed the Japan Coast Guard at 4:23 a.m., 16 minutes after the collision.

The information reached the Maritime Staff Office at 4:40 a.m. and the MSDF chief of staff and the Defense Ministry at 5 a.m.

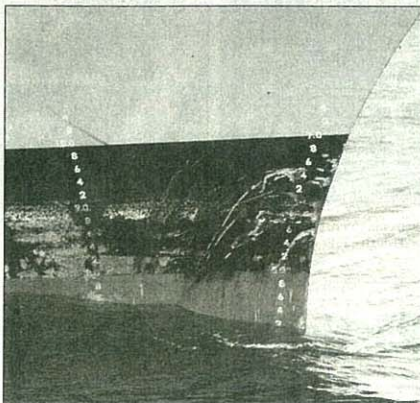
Ishiba was informed at 5:38 a.m. and Fukuda around 6 p.m. "When there is a possibility of people involved in an accident related to the ministry, the minister should immediately be informed," Fukuda told reporters.

Defense Ministry guidelines stipulate that SDF officers must inform aides to the minister and the senior vice minister of an emergency within an hour of its occurrence, ministry sources said.

In Tuesday's accident, the Maritime Staff Office operation room received information at 4:40 a.m. But it did not contact the minister's aides, and instead informed officials of the Bureau of Operational Policy within the ministry around 5 a.m.

The bureau's officials in turn informed Ishiba at 5:40 a.m. Not only was the defense minister informed late, but the officials did not go through the proper channels.

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



Above: The bow of the Seitoku Maru floats off Nojimazaki, Chiba Prefecture, on Tuesday after the fishing boat was split in two in a collision with the Maritime Self-Defense Force's Atago destroyer. Left, Right: The accident left scrapes on the bow of the Aegis-equipped destroyer.



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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.

Yoshihiko Yamada, a spokesman for The Nippon Foundation, said key issues include which of the two vessels had the right of way

under navigation rules, and whether sufficient watch was being kept in an area known for heavy sea traffic.

Another crucial issue is whether the Atago's attempts to rescue the two missing fishermen were sufficient, Yamada said.

The two vessels appear to have collided almost at right angles to each other, severely damaging the fishing boat's port side, according to Japan Coast Guard officials.

Navigation rules stipulate that when a vessel is about to cross another's course,

the one that sees the other ship on the starboard side must take steps to avoid a collision.

The rules also mandate that vessels headed for a head-on collision must both turn right.

Takavuki Matsui, an attorney specializing in maritime law who has been involved in inquiries into accidents at sea, said the two vessels in question were about to cross each other's path, and that the MSDF destroyer likely saw the smaller boat to the right.

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

The sea was calm and no

fog was reported in the area at the time of the accident.

Officials of the Defense Ministry also acknowledged that visibility was good.

Crew members on a destroyer are assigned to keep watch day and night from the bridge while navigating. Two crew members on the two sides of the bridge also must keep an eye on surrounding areas, according to the ministry's Maritime Staff Office.

Radars are also kept operating while navigating.

Military journalist Motoaki Kamiura said, "The fishing boat likely had its lights on and the MSDF watch should have seen that to sound the horn in warning." He said MSDF vessels

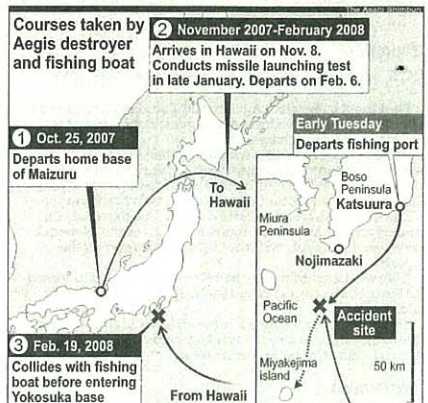
usually have a number of crew members keep watch in shifts of several hours each.

Kamiura speculated that the watch crew had been negligent in their duties.

Kamiura also said the crew of the fishing boat likely failed to carefully watch out for other vessels in the vicinity.

Masao Isogai, an official with the Marine Rescue Japan organization, said rescue operations are launched immediately after collisions by crew of the ship involved and of other vessels in nearby waters.

"Discovery is made easy if those in the water wear life jackets or are swimming," he said.



Experts: Crew likely not keeping proper watch

Attempts to rescue the fishermen may have also been insufficient.

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