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## **SRI LANKA SHIP FIRE EXTINGUISHED AFTER 13 DAYS**



### **Fire and explosion**

Above, smoke rises from the MV X-Press Pearl engulfed in flames off the port of Colombo on May 25. The vessel's 25-member crew, which includes Philippine, Chinese, Indian and Russian nationals, was evacuated that day following an explosion.

The navy believes the fire was caused by chemicals being transported on the ship. It was carrying 1,486 containers, including 25 tons of nitric acid and other chemicals that were loaded at the port of Hazira, India, on May 15. The fire has destroyed most of the ship's cargo.

Firefighting tugboats have been spraying the vessel, with support from vessels from the Sri Lankan navy and Indian coast guard.

A fire aboard a cargo ship off Sri Lanka was finally extinguished on Tuesday (Jun 1) after a 13-day operation.

In Sri Lanka's worst marine ecological disaster, huge volumes of microplastic granules from the ship's containers have inundated beaches, forcing a fishing ban and a major clean-up involving thousands of troops.

Experts from Dutch salvage company SMIT boarded the MV X-Press Pearl and reported massive flooding of the engine rooms.

The Singapore-registered vessel caught fire on May 20 when it was about to enter the Colombo port.

Navy spokesman Captain Indika de Silva said the stern of the 186m-long container carrier had gone down by about a metre because of the flooding.

"It is not unusual for the vessel to trim by aft (tilt to the rear) when water sprayed on deck settles in the engine room," Silva told AFP.

He said the spraying of water was stopped to prevent further flooding, but some areas of the ship were still too hot to carry out a complete examination of the vessel.

However, navy divers were carrying out examinations under the water line to ensure that there were no cracks in the hull to undermine the integrity of the ship, which is also carrying 278 tonnes of bunker oil and 50 tonnes of gasoil.

Sri Lanka's navy was joined by India's coastguard and tugs brought in by SMIT to battle the flames which destroyed most of the nearly 1,500 containers the vessel was carrying.

The three-month-old ship had 25 tonnes of nitric acid and other chemicals as well as 28 containers of plastic raw material, much of which fell into the sea.

Sri Lankan navy soldiers, clad in protective suits, have been brought in to remove the debris from the ship that has washed ashore on beaches.

Marine Environment Protection Authority chief Dharshani Lahandapura said they were still assessing the ecological damage, but believed it was the "worst ever in my lifetime".

The MEPA chief said the crew apparently knew of a nitric acid leak on May 11, long before the vessel entered Sri Lankan water en route to Malaysia and Singapore.

Sri Lanka began a criminal investigation Monday into the fire and the marine pollution.

Police spokesman Ajith Rohana said the captain and chief engineer, both Russian nationals, had been questioned for 14 hours since Monday. The third officer, an Indian national, was also questioned at length, he said.

"We are seeking advice from the attorney general on the next steps," Rohana said, adding that the 25-member crew who were evacuated from the vessel on May 25 were still in quarantine.

