

Six missing after tug capsizes while assisting MSC container ship off Busan

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MSC IKARIA VI Container Ship Source: VesselFinder

One crew member has died and six remain missing after a tugboat capsized while assisting a container ship off Busan, South Korea, with authorities now investigating whether topline tension during a manoeuvre contributed to the accident.

The 286-ton tug TNS Catcher capsized at around 13:29 local time on 2 September in waters near Oryukdo, according to the Busan Coast Guard. The vessel was carrying eight crew members, including six South Koreans and two Indonesians.

One Indonesian crew member was rescued by the Liberia-flagged container ship involved in the operation. Coast Guard personnel recovered a South Korean crew member unconscious from the water, but he was later pronounced dead at hospital. Six crew members remain missing.

The container ship involved has been identified as MSC IKARIA VI, a Liberia-flagged vessel operated by Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC).

Coast Guard investigates towing operation

Preliminary findings released by the Busan Coast Guard on 3 September indicate that TNS Catcher was working alongside two other tugboats to manoeuvre the 66,332-ton container ship when the accident occurred.

Two tugboats were positioned at the front of the container ship, while another was pushing from the stern. TNS Catcher was operating on the starboard side of the vessel's bow.

According to the Coast Guard's initial investigation, TNS Catcher began turning to starboard before suddenly rolling to port and capsizing.

Investigators are examining whether the tug's speed and timing during the change of direction, together with forces from the towline, contributed to the capsize.

"We presume that the vessel capsized due to the towline while making a starboard turn," Lee Kyeong-yeol, head of investigation at the Busan Coast Guard, said during a briefing reported by SBS.

However, authorities stressed that the precise cause has not yet been established. The Coast Guard has also ruled out a collision between the tug and the container ship.

CCTV footage obtained from the container ship reportedly shows the tug beginning its starboard turn before rolling over.

Search operation expanded

Following the capsize, TNS Catcher drifted before sinking. Authorities subsequently located the wreck on the seabed approximately 6.5 kilometres east of Songjeong Port at a depth of around 87 metres.

The Coast Guard has expanded the search area to approximately 66 kilometres by 40 kilometres as efforts continue to locate the six missing crew members.

A total of 24 vessels and seven aircraft have been deployed with support from the South Korean military and other government agencies. A Navy remotely operated vehicle was also sent to inspect the wreck area, although underwater visibility of around 30 centimetres has complicated the search.

Meanwhile, the Busan Coast Guard has formed a 41-member investigation team and questioned officials from the shipping company. Investigators have secured automatic identification system (AIS) records, voyage data recorder (VDR) information and CCTV footage as they work to reconstruct the circumstances surrounding the accident.

The Coast Guard said the investigation will continue to determine the exact cause of the capsize and any responsibility for the accident.

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