



Burning ship sinks off Tobago

By WENDY CAMPBELL

THE MULTI-MILLION dollar seismic survey vessel which caught fire on Friday morning sank yesterday, but a release from their representative owner, Hudson Marine Management Service, says pollution is not expected to occur.

However, a member of the Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service described the statement as "premature" and chairman of the Environmental Management Authority (EMA) John Agard has warned the Marine Management Services to guard against making absolute statements. Hudson Marine said it has launched an investigation into the cause of the fire, but sources told Sunday Newsday yesterday that the fire is believed to have started by a fuel leak near the engine area of the vessel.

Navarro's Shipping Limited is the agent for the vessel, which had been in the country since mid November doing a seismic survey for BHP Billiton. The vessel, described as a "floating computer" is worth "a few millions of US dollars well," sources said, and acquired data from sea level to find out where oil deposits are. CGG Mistral, according to Hudson Marine's one-page statement, sank at around 8.09am in 750 metres deep waters approximately 25 kilometres east of Tobago. It said the Apollo, a salvage vessel owned by Wijsmuller Salvage, had towed the vessel away from environmentally sensitive areas where fire-fighting efforts could be continued safely when the vessel listed and sank.

A response vessel, the Seacor Venture, which is equipped with dispersant capability, is presently on site prepared to respond to any leakage that might occur, said the Hudson Marine Management Services release.

"No pollution is expected since most of the diesel fuel onboard used to power the vessel has most likely already been consumed in the fire", the release said.

Another release from the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard's (TTGS) assistant press officer Chief Petty Officer (CPO) Brian DeGannes supported their statement, saying that an aerial view was conducted about 9.20am yesterday and there was no visual sightings of any oil or fuel slick on the sea surface. Another aerial view is to be conducted today, the Coast Guard said, to ensure that there is no oil slick.

However, John Springle, public relations officer of the Fire Service said it is indeed very imprudent and premature that a statement of the nature has been made, since one must take into consideration that residual fuel may have remained on the vessel. This, Springle stated, is coupled with other combustible materials.

"Apart from diesel, other things can cause contamination. One has to be very careful and take all things into consideration and not make blanket statements," Springle stated categorically in a telephone interview.

Agard, as well as Gary Aboud, secretary of Fishermen and Friends of the Sea are in agreement with Springle. "One has to be cautious about making absolute statements and there is need for continued surveillance to make sure nothing is released from the vessel after it sank," said the EMA chairman. Aboud said the public has no guarantee because the corporate sector has been found to lack credibility, worldwide.

"Corporate governance is a myth," Aboud said, pointing out that when a catastrophe like that occurs and the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard says it has no capacity to deal with it, "what can they (Coast Guard) deal with?"

Aboud wanted to know what is the Minister of National Security's statement on the capacity of the country's Coast Guard, and what is the country paying 253 officers for, some of whom he alleged earns a salary of over \$10,000 per month.

The Marine Management Services statement went on to say that the intensity of the fire throughout Friday night rendered salvage operations difficult and prevented response personnel from boarding the vessel. "After taking every action possible, response personnel were unable to save the stricken vessel, according to representatives for the owners, CGG and Louis Dreyfus Armateurs," the statement went on to say.

It noted that all of the 51 crew members aboard the vessel were evacuated safely and no injuries were reported.