

S'pore-flagged tanker stranded at Ukrainian port since invasion

Luke Pachymuthu
Senior Correspondent

A Singapore-flagged oil tanker with 22 crew members on board has been stranded at the Ukrainian port of Nikolaev since arriving at the terminal on Feb 24, just as Russian troops invaded the country, the vessel's ship manager told The Straits Times.

The roughly 46,700 deadweight tonne (dwt) tanker, MTM Rio Grande, which was due to load soya bean seed oil at the port, has been stuck there since Ukraine's military suspended commercial shipping at its ports to prevent the Russian navy from coming in to use them as landing points for its military operations.

According to data analytics firm Kpler, Ukraine exported a total of 3.8 million tonnes of vegetable oil last year, the bulk of which was headed for mainly India, followed by China.

Late last week, Russia attacked Ukraine in a mass assault by land, sea and air, the biggest attack by one state against another in Europe since World War II.

The Singapore-registered tanker has not sustained any damage, and its crew members, who do not include any Singaporeans, are "healthy and in stable condition", said Mr Rajiv Singhal, managing director of Singapore-based MTMM Ship Management, which manages the stranded ship.

He added: "We are in contact with local agents and the port security officers, and discussions are under way for evacuation if needed."

But the longer the ship and its crew remain at the port, the greater the risk of getting caught in the crossfire as fighting between Russian and Ukrainian forces comes to a boil.

Israeli maritime artificial intelligence (AI) firm Windward told ST that 162 Singapore-flagged ships made 234 port calls in Russia last month. Of these, 185 port calls were made between Feb 1 and Feb 22, while the remaining 49 were recorded from Feb 24, the first day of the Russian invasion, until the end of the month.

The firm added that 129 Singapore vessels rerouted from Russia to other destinations last month. Of the 181 destination changes made, 139 took place in the days leading



A satellite image showing the MTM Rio Grande at the Ukrainian port of Nikolaev, where it has been stuck, with 22 crew members aboard, since Feb 24. There are no Singaporeans on board the vessel. PHOTO: WINDWARD MARITIME AI

up to the invasion.

On Wednesday, a Bangladeshi seafarer was killed after a 38,894 dwt vessel, which belonged to the Bangladesh Shipping Corp, was struck by a missile while anchored in Olvia, over 100km from Odessa, according to media reports. The attack is the fourth on commercial ships in the Black Sea since Moscow's invasion of Ukraine began.

Windward's analysis shows there are currently about 120 vessels in the vicinity of where the MTM Rio Grande is anchored. Of these, 25 are

cargo vessels, 10 are tankers and 78 are service vessels, while the rest are unspecified sea craft.

Concerned for the safety of the crew, MTMM has been keeping in close contact with the crew members, who include the master of the ship, Mr Singhal said. He noted that his team in Singapore has been calling the crew every six hours since the vessel got stranded.

He said the company has also been updating the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore (MPA). He said MPA has assured him that it

would raise the ship's predicament with the International Maritime Organisation (IMO).

The MTM Rio Grande is understood to have food and water supplies that are sufficient for only another three weeks, Mr Singhal said. He added that the ship has enough marine fuel to last five weeks.

MPA was not immediately available for comment when contacted by ST.

On Wednesday, Nato issued a warning to commercial vessels, advising them to steer clear of military

vessels and to be on the lookout for mines, automatic identification system manipulation and cyber attacks.

Yesterday, the IMO said it will convene an emergency session next Thursday and Friday to discuss the safety and security of vessels plying the Black Sea and Azov Sea.

In a statement to ST, Mr Yuichi Sonoda, secretary-general of the Asian Shipowners' Association, expressed deep concern for the safety and security of all merchant ships and their personnel and seafarers who continue to sail through the Black Sea and Azov Sea.

He said: "There have been a few incidents since last week where merchant ships were caught in the military crossfire and were subsequently hit by missiles. Such incidents limit the freedom of navigation, which is the most important rule for the sustainability of shipping worldwide."

He added that "shipping is critical to the flow of international trade".

"We urge all parties to take measures to ensure the safety and security of all personnel, no matter their nationality."

lukep@sph.com.sg