

Sensex

20425.02

-180.06 ▼

-0.87% ▼

Nifty

6059.10

-56.25 ▼

-0.92% ▼

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POLITICS AND NATION

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Hijacked ship with satellite phone seized

28 Nov, 2008, 1051 hrs IST, TNN

MUMBAI/NEW DELHI: A massive manhunt has been launched off the Mumbai coast on Wednesday by Coast Guard, Navy, marine wing of Mumbai Police and Customs after it became evident that most, if not all, of the terrorists had arrived in the city through sea route. Coast Guard's IG (Western Region) Rajendra Singh said three helicopters, two Dorniers, three large ships, two smaller vessels were involved in the search.

Coast Guard officials on Thursday evening intercepted a fishing trawler, Kuber, from Porbandar, five nautical miles away from the Mumbai shore. The ship had been missing since November 13 on the high seas and is suspected to have been hijacked by the terrorists who struck on Mumbai on Wednesday.

A GPS map of south Mumbai was found along with a satellite phone on the ship, Coast Guard officials confirmed. There were reports that this phone was used to make calls to Karachi immediately before the shootings began in Mumbai. The Coast Guard proposes to hand the ship over to Mumbai Police soon. Food packets were also found on Kuber. Coast Guard officials said the owner, Vinod Masani, was detained by the Porbandar police on Thursday. "We want to find out if the occupants of Kuber did the job for terrorists for a fee or whether it was hijacked," said a senior Coast Guard officer.

About eight terrorists came in from the sea off Badhwar Park in Colaba in geminircraft (inflatable boat) with a 20-HP engine around 9pm on Wednesday. A police officer of the Cuffe Parade police station said fishermen near the jetty got suspicious as they deserted the boat and headed towards the road. "When the fishermen stopped them, they said, 'humko tension hai' and pointed their weapons," said the police officer.

Another officer of the Cuffe Parade police station said, "The fishermen told us they were about 10-12 men. They split into two groups. While one group went towards CST and other headed towards Colaba. The engine and chasiss number of the Yamaha motor engine used for the boat has been scrapped, so as to make it difficult to trace the place of purchase."

A retired IPS officer said the fishermen had also called the police, but they came late. An official said boats deserted by terrorists have been found in Colaba and off Chowpatty.

Meanwhile, A merchant vessel, MV Alpha, suspected to have ferried the terrorists, was intercepted on the high seas by Navy and Coast Guard warships on Thursday evening. Though some reports said the Vietnamese-registered MV Alpha had been given the "clean chit", a senior naval officer told TOI the ship was still being investigated after it was boarded by naval and Coast Guard personnel on the high seas off Gujarat's coast.

"The probe will take some time. The vessel's crew and manifest are being checked," he said. Earlier, launching a surveillance with warships, Dornier aircraft and copters, armed forces began a hunt for "a mother ship" which could have carried the perpetrators of the terror strikes since three inflatable Zodiac gemini boats were found abandoned at the dock near the Gateway of India.

"MV Alpha, which came to Mumbai from Saudi Arabia on November 19 and left on Wednesday night, was found to be suspicious. It had sailed around 50 nautical miles away from Mumbai by 7 am on Thursday," said an officer.

A naval Veer-class guided missile corvette INS Vipul and a Coast Guard T-81 fast-attack craft were soon launched, along with two Dornier medium-range maritime reconnaissance aircraft, to track and intercept MV Alpha.

Simultaneously, a Leander-class frigate INS Vindhyagiri was also diverted from its routine patrol at sea to hunt the merchant vessel. Moreover, the IAF scrambled maritime strike Jaguar fighters from Jamnagar to patrol the region. All this activity came amid indications that the aim was to block any attempt by a "suspect" ship to reach Pakistan.

"Ten Army columns (around 1,000 soldiers) and four units of marine commandos were deployed in and around the Taj Mahal and Trident hotels. An aerial and land surveillance at the approaches to the Mumbai harbour was also conducted, with antecedents of all vessels in and around the region being checked," said an official.

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