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Russian Ship Arctic Wolf Seized Amid Gunfire Over Poaching Crabs

By Peter Spinella

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Russia's coast guard fired warning shots and seized a fleeing Kamchatka-registered ship named the Arctic Wolf whose 27-member crew is suspected of poaching lucrative crabs in far eastern waters, a law enforcement spokesman said Monday.

The ship, apparently equipped for crab fishing, did not respond to a radio message and increased its speed when a coast guard vessel approached it in the Sea of Okhotsk on Feb. 23, Federal Security Service spokesman Viktor Veshnev told the Interfax news agency.

The coast guard resorted to firing a series of warning shots, after which the fishing vessel slowed down and allowed authorities to board, Veshnev said. On board, agents found apparatus for fishing crabs and preparing them for sale, including traps, packing containers and salt, Interfax reported.

One of the crewmen was already on a federal wanted list, and, according to the captain, another crewman had gone missing three days earlier "without a trace" while the vessel was fishing, the spokesman was cited by Interfax as saying. The ship has been taken to the city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky while an investigation is under way.

Kamchatka king crabs are a delicacy, and poaching them in recent years amounted to an estimated $500 million in annual revenue. In 2013, the Russian government lifted a five-year ban on fishing for the crabs, but still restricts the fishing to certain zones.

In September last year Russia's coast guard seized a Lithuanian fishing vessel that was allegedly carrying 15 tons of illegally fished crabs in the Barents Sea.

The case caused an international scandal, with Lithuanian authorities decrying the seizure as a "forced apprehension" in international waters, Reuters reported at the time. Lithuanian news agencies reported in February that a Russian court had released the ship after imposing a 4 million ruble ($60,000) fine.

The Russian coast guard said in October 2013 that a one-week sweep of illegal fishing in the far-eastern Primorye region uncovered damages to marine resources estimated at 400,000 rubles ($6,400), according to a statement released by the Federal Security Service.

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