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Sanctioned Oil Tankers Hit by Blasts, Fire En Route to Russia, Turkey Says

By AFP

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Turkish authorities on Friday said they had taken crews off two oil tankers in the Black Sea after explosions and fires, suggesting they may have been hit by devices.

The Directorate General of Maritime Affairs wrote on X that the Kairos, which was empty and en route to the Russian port of Novorossiysk, caught fire 28 nautical miles (52 kilometers) off the Turkish coast "due to external causes."

"All 25 crew members are safe and sound," it added.

Flames and thick black smoke were visible at the bow of the vessel. No sea pollution was immediately reported.

The fire broke out on the Gambian-flagged Kairos at about 6:00 p.m. off Kefken, in Turkey's northern Kocaeli province, its Governor Ilhami Aktas told the private NTV channel.

A second oil tanker, the Virat, "reported being hit approximately 35 nautical miles away," the directorate said, without specifying the nature of the impact.

"Rescue teams and a cargo vessel were sent to the scene. The 20 crew members are safe and sound and thick smoke was detected in the engine room," it added.

The Virat is also Gambian-flagged, according to the Vesselfinder website.

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"An external cause means the vessel was hit by a mine, a rocket or a similar projectile, or by a drone, or by an unmanned underwater vehicle," Turkish Transport Minister Abdulkadir Uraloglu said on NTV.

The two tankers are under Western sanctions for transporting oil from Russian ports despite an embargo imposed after Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The minister said the 25 crew members from the Kairos were evacuated safely and rescue teams had also reached the Virat.

"Their health and safety are not at risk," he said.

"No pollution has been detected so far, but we are monitoring the fire's progress."

A number of naval mines have been located and destroyed in the Black Sea since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The mines, placed by both sides to protect the coastline, have since drifted, particularly during storms.

NATO members Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania, which all have a coastline on the Black Sea, established a naval Mine Countermeasures Group in 2024 in response to the danger.

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