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Deadly Tanker Explosion Spreads Oily Slick on Atlantic

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PORTSMOUTH, Virginia, March 1, 2004 (ENS) - Coast Guard crews searched for survivors all day Sunday after a 570 foot tanker carrying industrial ethanol exploded and sank 50 miles off Chincoteague, Virginia, on Saturday night.

The "Bow Mariner" with 27 people on board radioed the Coast Guard shortly after six pm to report the explosion. Nine people are accounted for – six survivors and three dead - before the search was suspended Sunday night.

Coast Guard aircrews operating a C-130 airplane, and three helicopters were engaged in the rescue. A 47 foot motor lifeboat and two Coast Guard patrol boats attended to the scene of the explosion in international waters.

Hopes for more rescues faded as darkness fell. The six survivors who were recovered from the water were taken to Norfolk Sentara Hospital. Three were released Sunday. The others are in good condition and could be released Monday morning, hospital officials said.

The Singapore flagged vessel was travelling from New York to Houston with 3.5 million gallons of ethanol on board. The Coast Guard says any pollution effects from this incident will be addressed after daybreak today.

Industrial ethanol is used in solvents, toiletries and cosmetics, coatings and inks, detergents and household cleaners.

Coast Guard officials said that most of the ethanol from the tanker has evaporated, but fuel from the ship's storage tanks has formed an oil slick over nine square miles of the Atlantic.

The Coast Guard says the "Bow Mariner" was carrying 48,000 gallons of stored diesel fuel and 193,000 gallons of heavy fuel oil. Marine scientists using computer models believe the spill will be carried out to sea rather than showing up on Atlantic shores.

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