

CHAPTER V : MINISTRY OF EARTH SCIENCES

5.1 Wasteful expenditure on refurbishment of a vessel

National Centre for Antarctic and Ocean Research did not effectively plan its requirements for hiring of a ship for its Antarctica expedition. As a result, it spent ` 43.68 lakh for refurbishment of a vessel which was ultimately not hired, rendering the entire expenditure wasteful. Ineffective planning also resulted in curtailment of objectives envisaged for the 27th Antarctica expedition.

National Centre for Antarctic and Ocean Research Goa (NCAOR), an autonomous unit under Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES), had hired a vessel 'MV Emerald Sea' in October 2006 for Antarctica expeditions in 2006-07 and 2007-08. In June 2007, NCAOR decided to charter another vessel called 'MV Ivan Papanin' through Norwegian Polar Institute (NPI) from 20 January 2008 for another expedition to Antarctica. MV Ivan Papanin was to travel from Cape Town to Maitri (27th expedition) and was thus, in addition to MV Emerald which was hired exclusively for travel from Goa to Larsemann Hill¹ and back. The National Committee for Antarctic Programme (NCAP) for the 27th Indian Scientific Expedition to Antarctica, while according approval to the programmes in its meeting held in July 2007, also decided that the expedition to Maitri be totally delinked with the expedition planned to Larsemann Hills in order to provide sufficient working time to the members of both expeditions. The envisaged objective of expedition to Maitri was to continue important scientific assignments at Maitri, undertake glaciological research that has direct bearing on global warming and climate change studies as well as carry out ongoing scientific programs related to atmospheric science, meteorology and mapping biological diversity etc.

It was observed in audit that:

- (i) NCAOR went ahead and hired MV Ivan Papanin without ensuring that adequate budgetary provision was available with it.
- (ii) NCAOR directed NPI in August 2007 to execute refurbishing work on MV Ivan Papanin related to modification of seven additional cabins, upgradation for helicopter operations, etc., at an estimated cost of US \$

¹ The Larsemann Hills is an ice-free area of 40 square km, located approximately halfway between the Vestfold Hills and the Amery Ice Shelf on the south-eastern coast of Prydz Bay, Princess Elizabeth Land, East Antarctica.

1.45 lakh². Subsequently, in October 2007, NCAOR intimated NPI that as MV Ivan Papanin was capable of providing only limited helicopter operations from the deck, the expedition objectives would not be met and as such, it had decided not to hire MV Ivan Papanin. NCAOR, however, released payment of ` 43.68 lakh in December 2007 towards expenditure on refurbishing of the vessel.

- (iii) Though NCAOR cited the limited operations of helicopters from the deck of the vessel as a reason for not hiring MV Ivan Papanin, the reason cited in the records of NCAOR was 'budgetary constraints'.

NCAOR, thus spent ` 43.68 lakh without ascertaining whether MV Ivan Papanin matched its requirement and also whether it had sufficient funds at its disposal for undertaking this expedition. This pointed to failure on part of NCAOR to plan its expedition effectively and its failure in ensuring adequacy of funds before undertaking the expedition. Ineffective planning also resulted in curtailment of objectives envisaged for the 27th Antarctica expedition.

NCAOR stated in May 2009 that MV Ivan Papanin vessel was engaged only to avoid hardships of the kind experienced during the earlier charter season for 2006-07, when MV Emerald reported outside of laycan³ period and was also unprepared for the Antarctic voyage. NCAOR also stated that if the response from MV Emerald had been negative at the last moment, NCAOR would have been left with no time for arranging an alternative means of transporting the life sustaining cargo to Antarctica and consequences would have been disastrous and far-reaching, compromising the survival of men at Maitri. NCAOR further stated in June 2009 that by not going ahead with engaging MV Ivan Papanin, it saved an amount of ` 9.45 crore on charter fees.

The reply of NCAOR that MV Ivan Papanin vessel was engaged only to avoid hardships of the kind experienced during the earlier charter season for 2006-07 was incorrect. The scrutiny of documents relating to hiring of MV Ivan Papanin indicated that in case MV Emerald did not respond positively, another vessel i.e. Boris Petrav was to be kept as the standby vessel and not MV Ivan Papanin.

MoES stated in November 2009 that as the required funds were made available on earlier occasions at revised estimate stage, it planned to arrange

² ` 57.56 lakh at the conversion rate of ` 39.695 for 1 USD.

³ An abbreviation of "layday cancelling date" and is used in a voyage charter party, referring to a designated period of time, or window, reserved for the execution of a specific operation.

another suitable expedition vessel to save time. It also agreed that as fund arrangements and planning did not match properly, it had to incur ` 43.68 lakh for refurbishing of the vessel and agreed that no savings of ` 9.45 crore was made by not hiring M V Ivan Papanin, as claimed by NCAOR earlier. It, however, assured that the corrective measures had already been taken to improve planning with regard to launching of various scientific expeditions to southern high latitude regions including Antarctica, to avoid any repetition of such situation in future.