

France holds captain of ship tracked near Denmark drone activity

LEILA ABOUD — PARIS
RICHARD MILNE AND HENRY FOY
COPENHAGEN

France has detained the captain of an oil tanker that was sailing close to Denmark during a series of drone incursions last week, saying it was questioning him over unrelated naval infractions, including failing to obey police orders.

Sébastien Lecornu, French prime minister, said the vessel, anchored off the coast of western France, was part of the Russian shadow fleet, which Moscow has used to evade western restrictions on its energy sector since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

“Thank you to our navy commandos and the crews who intervened . . . to board a tanker from the Russian ghost fleet; currently anchored off Saint-Nazaire, as part of an investigation” into where the ship was registered, Lecornu said in a post on X yesterday.

The oil tanker was tracked off the coast of Denmark last week at about the same time as drones were spotted in Danish airspace near military sites, leading to interruptions in air traffic.

French prosecutors said the ship, Boracay, which had recently changed its name from Pushpa, was “considered to be an unregistered vessel under international law” and was carrying “a large cargo of oil” bound from Russia to India. The captain and a crew member detained with him, both Chinese nationals, were released after questioning.

The captain is under formal investigation over allegations he refused to comply with requests from commandos who boarded the ship to check its registration. He was ordered to appear in court in Brest in February. The second person was released without further action.

Danish and French authorities have declined to comment on whether the vessel was linked to the drone incidents, but European leaders in recent days have stressed the importance of cracking down on shadow fleet vessels to tighten defences against hybrid warfare.

The tanker has repeatedly changed names and registrations and is now sailing under the flag of Benin, according to ship-tracking service MarineTraffic. It is listed under British and EU sanctions against Russia. Baaj Shipping Ltd, listed as the owner and manager of the Pushpa on the EU’s Equasis shipping database, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The vessel left a Russian oil terminal near St Petersburg on September 20 and has been off the coast of France since Sunday, according to MarineTraffic.

Danish officials have said they do not know who was behind at least four nights of drone sightings at airports and military sites last week.

Mette Frederiksen, Danish prime minister, refused to comment on whether shadow fleet vessels were under suspicion of being involved. But she added: “I can say in more general terms that we are facing a lot of problems with the shadow fleet. That has been the case, especially in the Baltic Sea, for quite a long time. And we are working very closely together to fight this situation.”

Additional reporting by Anne-Sylvaine Chassany in Berlin