

India denies discussing release of tankers with Iran for Hormuz passage

Reuters
New Delhi

India yesterday denied holding talks with Iran about releasing three tankers seized in February in exchange for ensuring safe passage for Indian ships through the Strait of Hormuz.

Indian authorities seized the three Iran-linked ships near Indian waters alleging they had concealed or altered their identities and were involved in illegal ship-to-ship transfers at sea.

Reuters reported on Monday, citing sources, that Iran had asked India to release the US-sanctioned ships as part of talks seeking the safe passage of Indian-flagged or India-bound vessels out of the Gulf via the Strait.

Traffic has ground to a near standstill on either side of the Strait since the beginning of the US-Israeli war with Iran.

India's foreign ministry spokesperson, Randhir Jaiswal, called the report baseless.

"There has been no discussion of this nature," he told a news briefing. "I would also like to say the three vessels you referred to are not Iranian-owned."

The seized tankers, Asphalt Star, Al Jafzia and Stellar Ruby, are currently docked off Mumbai. Stellar Ruby is Iranian-flagged, while the other two vessels are flagged to Nicaragua and Mali, according to LSEG data.

A police complaint filed by the Indian Coast Guard on February 15, and seen by Reuters, said Asphalt Star was involved in the

smuggling of heavy fuel oil that was transferred to Al Jafzia and bitumen to Stellar Ruby.

All three ships are tied to entities under US sanctions for allegedly helping transport Iranian oil. The consultant for the vessels, Jugwinder Singh Brar, is himself on a US sanctions list, though he denies any illicit activity.

At the time of the seizure, Iranian state media cited the National Iranian Oil Company as saying that the three tankers had no connection to the company.

Iran has in recent days allowed some Indian ships to safely pass the Strait and Jaiswal said discussions were ongoing to ensure the safe transit of the other ships. At least 22 Indian vessels are still in the waterway, the government says.