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MAGAZINE

THE IRISH TIMES

WEEKEND EDITION

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Wales under snow

Weather alerts across Ireland

As Wales and England deal with disruption from snow, a number of status yellow weather warnings have been issued for Ireland this weekend, with temperatures forecast to fall to as low as -4 degrees, according to Met Éireann.

Wintry showers in many areas could result in snow accumulations, leading to potentially hazardous travel conditions and poor visibility.

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Aerial view near Llanrwst shows north Wales and Snowdonia. Photograph: Christopher Furlong/Getty

Inspiring holiday destinations

MAGAZINE

+ CONOR POPE'S MONEY-SAVING TRAVEL TIPS

Crystal ball

Predictions for the sporting year ahead

SPORT

Housing

The adults living with parents into midlife

WEEKEND

Let there be light

Patrick Freyne meets Dermot Bannon

TICKET

Pursued tanker on course for Irish waters

US coast guard began pursuing vessel two weeks ago as it sailed to Venezuela

Crew paints Russian flag on oil tanker as Moscow requests US to stop pursuit

CONOR GALLAGHER
Crime and Security Correspondent

A ship under active pursuit by the United States military as part of the Trump administration's targeting of Venezuelan oil appears set to enter Irish-controlled waters in the coming days.

Irish authorities are monitoring the passage of the oil tanker, which satellite data suggests will take the northern route around Ireland on its way to a Russian North Sea port.

Ships taking such a route typically travel through Ireland's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) or along its upper boundary.

The US coast guard began pursuing the Very Large Crude Carrier class ship two weeks ago as it sailed to Venezuela to take on a shipment of oil.

The Trump administration has put sanctions on the export of oil from the South American country and to date has seized two of its tankers.

The ship, which was known as the Bella 1, subsequently turned around and sailed into the Atlantic, with US military vessels in pursuit.

In recent days it has changed its name to Marinera and its crew has painted a Russian flag on its side in an apparent effort to deter boarding by US forces.

The vessel has also been added to Russia's official shipping registry, having previously flown the flag of Guyana.

Ships are entitled to the protection of the country they are registered in. The acceptance of the ship on to the Russian registry indicates Moscow has accepted this position.

According to the New York Times, Russia has formally requested the US to stop pursuing the vessel.

Seizure order

However, US authorities claim the tanker is falsely registered and is a "shadow vessel", one of hundreds of ships that use fake or misleading registrations to avoid sanctions. A US court has issued a seizure order for the ship. Under the laws of the sea, it is open to countries to seize a vessel flying a false flag.

The ship's automatic identification system had been switched off, rendering it invisible on open-source platforms. However, it was turned back on yesterday and was transmitting its location in the Atlantic.

However, satellite data provided by the analysis company Starboard Maritime Intelligence showed the Marinera sailing at speed northeast across the Atlantic yesterday afternoon, meaning it could enter the Irish EEZ over the weekend or early next week if it maintains its course.

It may also change course and head to a port on the Baltic Sea. This would involve sailing along Ireland's south coast and into the English Channel.

The ship's passage presents a highly unusual situation for Irish authorities. The Defence Forces and Irish Coast Guard have been responding to a dramatic increase in shadow fleet vessels appearing in the Irish EEZ over the last year.

However, they have not yet been forced to deal with an unflagged oil tanker being actively pursued by another country through Irish waters while claiming the protection of a third.

Specialist boarding parties

The US coast guard continues to track the Marinera. According to US media, it has deployed specialist boarding parties on pursuing ships. However, since the ship claimed Russian registration, there have been no attempts to seize the vessel.

Domestic security sources said Irish authorities are monitoring the vessel's passage via satellite and have been in communication with their US counterparts.

"Based on the ship's position and the behaviour of other ships, a route around the top of Ireland is the mostly likely scenario," said an Irish security source. "Transiting through [the Irish EEZ] is the safest and cheapest option. On the other hand, the ship has been displaying some highly unusual behaviour so it's difficult to be certain what it's intentions are."

If the ageing tanker, which is not carrying oil, continues its course, the Defence Forces will probably deploy a maritime patrol aircraft to monitor its passage, sources said.

One in five vape shops selling e-cigarettes to children

ELLEN COYNE
Political Correspondent

More than a fifth of vape shops tested were selling highly addictive vaping devices to children despite a ban on sales to under-18s since 2023.

Between January and October last year, 51 retailers were caught selling vapes to children. This represented more than 22 per cent of the 224 shops where inspectors carried out tests to see if the devices would be sold to under-18s.

Inspections were carried out by the HSE's National Environmental Health Service, which is responsible for enforcing a 2023 law that banned the sale of nicotine-inhaling vaping products to children.

The ban came into effect on December 22nd, 2023. Since March 2024 the HSE has had the power to carry out "test purchasing" to detect retailers who may be continuing to sell vapes to children.

In 2024, the HSE carried out 223 test purchases and found 40 retailers selling the products to under-18s. This increased to 51 retailers out of 224 tests in the first 10 months of last year.

Fines

Retailers caught selling vapes to under-18s face a fine of up to €4,000 and up to six months in prison.

Ireland also regulates the safety, quality and advertising of vapes through a 2016 European Union directive.

In 2024, the HSE carried out 256 inspections to make sure basic regulations on the sale of vapes were being upheld.

From these inspections, 14 prohibition orders stopping the sale of unregulated vapes were served on shops that the HSE felt were not complying with the law. Between January and October last year, 36 prohibition orders were served following 496 inspections.

The figures were released by the HSE in response to a parliamentary question from Malcolm Byrne, the Fianna Fáil TD for Wicklow-Wexford.

Mr Byrne said nicotine-inhaling "is a serious public health risk", saying: "These devices may help some give up cigarettes, but it still involves inhaling a dangerous substance."

A proposed law to ban the sale of disposable electronic cigarettes or vapes is making its way through the Oireachtas.

Weather

Cold with frost and ice to begin and some lying snow from overnight wintry showers. Highs of 2-6 degrees.

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