

Missing SA yacht a mystery

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'All Ships Alert' for Cape vessel

MURRAY WILLIAMS

AN URGENT international search is under way today for a Cape Town sailing yacht, which may have hit disaster in the mid-Atlantic while carrying a crew home from Rio de Janeiro.

There has been no communication since Sunday and satellite tracking has perplexed organisers.

The city of Cape Town-sponsored development yacht, the Spirit of Izivunguvungu, sailed in the Heineken Cape to Rio 2011 yacht race, and is on the long voyage home. It is skippered by Kader Williams, 30, of Mitchell's Plain, and four crew who are graduates of the Izivunguvungu Sailing Development School in Simonstown.

The yacht was approaching the seas north of the island Tristan da Cunha late last week, and the team's manager, Manuel Mendez, spoke to Williams on Friday.

But on Sunday, the yacht could suddenly not be reached, and communications links

have been dead since then, the race's head of communications, Jean van Rooyen, said.

The vessel carried a satellite tracker, and this continued to "ping" every hour, giving the yacht's location, she said.

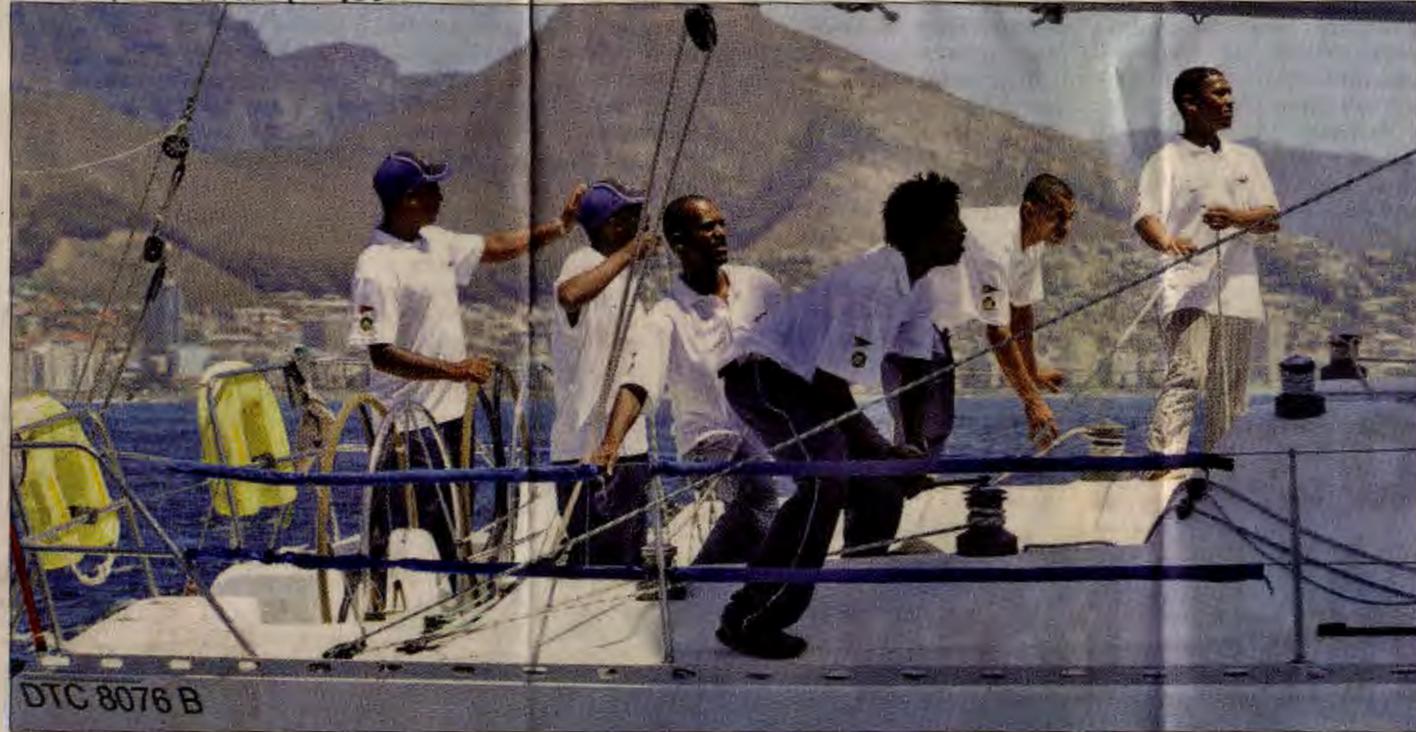
But race organisers were perplexed and increasingly concerned to see the vessel apparently slowing to a snail's pace, and then going backwards earlier this week.

This prompted race organiser and commodore of the Royal Cape Yacht Club, legendary sailor John Martin, to request Cape Town Radio to issue an international "All Ships Alert", which requests all vessels to keep an eye out for the vessel.

Then, at 2pm yesterday, the satellite tracker stopped communicating altogether, increasing concerns further.

The international alert was immediately escalated to one measure short of a "Mayday" – requesting the nearest ship to the yacht's last known co-ordinates to actively start searching for the vessel.

The yacht's tracker started



DISAPPEARED: The Spirit of Izivunguvungu and its crew have been missing since Sunday. They were returning from Rio de Janeiro. The race organisers said they tracked the yacht slowing and then appearing to go backwards. Top right: Spirit of Izivunguvungu left and Durban yacht Prodigy as they left Cape Town on January 16.

PICTURES: BRENTON GEEAH

"pinging" again late last night, and at 6am the vessel was about 140 nautical miles north of Tristan da Cunha. Van Rooyen reported that the yacht was only making an exceedingly slow 0.54 knots per hour.

"It's very worrying, we don't know what's going on," she said.

Van Rooyen reported that the Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centre (MRCC) had issued the latest request to ships in the area.

Sources at the MRCC said the South African authorities had requested assistance from Paraguay and Brazil, whose rescue services were super-

vising the search.

Councillor Brett Herron, Mayco member for Community Services, whose department sponsored the yachts, said he had received information confirming the situation, and awaited further news.

"It is deeply worrying, but we are monitoring the situa-

tion, and will do what we can," he said.

The Spirit of Izivunguvungu had to endure earlier dramas in the race itself, after the boat ran out of water.

Dale Kushner's Xtra-Link was dispatched by Martin to help the Spirit of Izivunguvungu, after the Spirit's water-



maker broke down while the vessel was still 1 400 nautical miles from Rio, forcing Williams to call race headquarters for help

The City of Cape Town reported at the time, quoting Kushner: "We met mid-ocean yesterday morning at about 11am, and there was almost 20 knots of wind blowing and a sea running. The two boats could not come alongside one another, or they would have been damaged," he said in a link-up to race control."

"None the less, they were able to transfer 20 cans of isotonic drink, which the crew immediately drank. During the 45-minute operation, they transferred 140 litres of water, which is more than sufficient for the rest of the voyage," the City reported.

There were suggestions at the time that the yacht would be disqualified for being given fresh water, but race organisers decided against this, instead adding a penalty of six hours.