

Yacht in crash drama

AUCKLAND — All 23 yachts set sail yesterday on the fourth leg of the gruelling Whitbread round-the-world race, as thousands on pleasure craft bid them farewell.

An estimated 6 000 spectator boats escorted the racing fleet out of a carnival-like Auckland harbour for the long haul back to Punte del Este, Uruguay.

The signal to start the race was given in the presence of the Duke of Edinburgh.

French craft La Poste was among the first to cross the start line in a northerly breeze.

There was a minor scare when the American-owned, Swedish-skipped yacht The Card crashed into a spectator board and ploughed through a group of other craft.

Part of its mast caught the top of the spectator boat's mast and dragged it along for almost 20 minutes before crews cut the vessels free.

Roger Nilson, skipper of The Card, decided to continue as no member of the crew was injured and there was no further damage to the boat.

Late yesterday, Rothmans was reported to be holding a slight lead.

The fleet, representing 13 nations, will race for eight months and cover 33 000 nautical miles before finishing in Southampton, England, in May.

Steinlager II, skippered by NZ's Peter Blake, has won the first three legs.

Blake has sailed in every Whitbread race since 1973-74.

Steinlager II holds an overall lead of 14 hrs 9 min over Swiss entry Merit, skippered by Pierre Fehlmann.

After arriving in Punta del Este, the fleet will make its way to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, before crossing the Atlantic. — Sapa-AP.