

90 DEAD

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# Race to save 200 stranded whales in Australia

**SYDNEY:** Rescuers faced a race against time to save nearly 200 whales stuck in a remote Australian harbour yesterday, hoping to prevent the toll of 90 dead from rising further after managing to free “a small number” of the stranded mammals.

Scientists said two large pods of long-finned pilot whales became stuck on sandbars in Macquarie Harbour on Tasmania's rugged and sparsely populated west coast. Images from the scene showed a shallow body of water, thick with scores of the large slick-black mammals manoeuvring for space.

About 60 people, including volunteers and local fish-farm workers, are involved in the rescue attempt and could be seen wad-

ing in the water to reach the whales to refloat them in deeper passages.

Government marine biologist Kris Carlyon said “about a third” of the 270 animals were dead by Monday, and that rescuing survivors would be a “challenging” task likely to take several days.

But there were hopes yesterday that early rescue efforts were already paying off, according to the official leading the operation.

“We have now freed a small number successfully that appear to have stayed out at sea, and are now scaling up that approach,” Parks and Wildlife Service manager Nic Deka said.

Though mass whale strandings occur relatively often in Tasmania, such a large group has not

been seen in the area for more than a decade.

The animals are only accessible by boat, limiting the number of rescuers who can reach them. They are battling chilly and rainy conditions as well as the harbour's unusual tides, which are dictated by barometric pressure.

“In terms of mass whale strandings in Tasmania, this is up there with the trickiest,” Carlyon in the

nearby town of Strahan.

However, he said many of the partially submerged whales should be able to survive for the several days it would take his team to complete the task, in part due to the inclement weather.

Carlyon said rescuers would still have to “triage” the whales, prioritising the healthiest and most accessible.

Once the whales are returned to

deeper water, Carlyon said, the biggest challenge will be herding the social creatures out of the sandbar-riddled harbour and back into the open ocean.

Scientists said it was unclear what caused the latest stranding, but Carlyon suggested the pod may have gone off track after feeding close to the shoreline or by following one or two whales that strayed. **AFP**



Rescuers working to save a pod of whales stranded on a beach in Macquarie Harbour on the rugged west coast of Tasmania yesterday.

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