Coast guards probe mystery of missing research ship

Within the next few weeks, the US coast guard hope to have developed a plausible explanation for the mysterious disappearance last December of a research vessel charted by the University of Hawaii with seven scientists on board.

No trace of the vessel, the Holoholo, has been found since it set sail from Honolulu harbour on the afternoon of 9 December. The trip was one of a series planned to gather data on the oceanographic conditions off the Hawaii coast in connection with the sating of a proposed ocean thermal energy conversion (OTEC) project supported by the Department of Energy.

Evidence has been found to indicate that the vessel may have put in to shore to make bench-mark readings for some of the scientific equipment. However, the alarm was raised when it failed to make a planned rendezvous with two scientists two days after its departure from Honolulu, following a period of stormy weather.

On board the Holoholo at the time of its disappearance were three scientists from the University of Hawaii — including the principal investigator for the project, assistant professor of engineering Dr Gary C Niemeyer — two scientists from the University of California's Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, which has responsibility for the OTEC research programme, and two scientists from the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Agency.

Various theories about the disappearance have been voiced during extensive hearings that have already been held in Honolulu by a board of enquiry established jointly by the coast guard and the National Transportation Safety Board. These range from the hypothesis of an explosion on board to the suggestion by some, quoting the Glomar Explorer's links with the CIA, that the vessel might have been captured by a foreign power.

According to a local newspaper, the Honolulu advertiser, the board that the boat sank after being swamped by heavy seas — and that the swamping may have been partly due to structural alterations made to the vessel to accommodate various species of equipment required for the research.

The safety board has already issued a set of recommendations to the University following the Holoholo's disappearance in which it says that some of the alterations, which included the installation of two large winches, a large spool of cable, and an A-frame cargo boom on the after part of the vessel, "may have adversely affected the