

Lebanon-Jiyeh Oil Spill July 2006 (August 14, 2006)

The cause of the spill

On July 12 2006 Israel declared war on Lebanon. On July 13 and 15, 2006 Israeli forces bombed Jiyeh power plant, located along the coastline, 30 km South of Beirut, causing a major oil spill.

As a result of the two attacks, two tanks at Jiyeh caused a 15,000 ton-heavy-fuel-oil spill into the Mediterranean Sea, while a fire burnt for more than three weeks releasing a smog of dioxins and noxious chemicals into the atmosphere.

The extent of affected area

South West to North East winds and water current pushed the oil spill northwards along the coast of Lebanon. The affected area within Lebanese borders spread through more than 100 km of rocky and sandy beaches, marinas, ports, fishermen harbors, and tourist resorts; extending from Jiyeh south of Beirut all the way up to the Syrian borders (map available). The oil slick has entered Syrian waters and has contaminated the coastline-north of the Lebanese- Syrian border summing the area of contamination to 140km in length and 15km in width. The spill can reach neighboring countries such as Cyprus, Turkey and Greece depending on water currents and weather conditions. 80 percent of the heavy oil remains on and off the East Mediterranean shoreline, while around 20 percent has evaporated.

The impact of the spill

The oil spill caused tremendous negative environmental, social and economical both on the short term and long term. It damaged marine ecosystems, destroyed fishermen's livelihoods and rendered coastal areas lifeless. The type of oil released, heavy fuel oil, is among the most difficult to combat.

Its viscous nature leads to prolonged persistence in the marine environment, such oils have the potential to cause widespread contamination of sensitive environmental and economic resources.

The marine ecosystem will thus take years to rehabilitate. The plume caused from the burnt fuel will increased cancer cases, respiratory problems and other diseases. The total economical cost of this oil spill has been estimated to be more than 200 million dollars. What increases from the impact of this spill and makes the rehabilitation process harder, is the fact that after more than a month from the start of the incident no cleanup operations have started yet.

What has been done so far

Green Line Association volunteers and a number of environmental activists formed an oil spill working group to follow on this issue and were among the first to be on the ground. Assessment operations and documentation of the damage started on the 17th of July covering the Lebanese coast from Beirut, northwards. As a result maps of the polluted Lebanese coasts and details of each coastal area magnitude of pollution were developed. Other than the assessment operations, Green Line also started working on cleanup plans,

and conducted scientific and economic research of the oil spill to determine the cost of the damage and how to minimize its impact as much as possible.

Green Line has also been communicating with related local and international stakeholders any coordinating any work on this issue. In this effect Green Line has contracted an expert from IUCN to come to Lebanon and produce an assessment and clean up plan.

Some of the stakeholders contacted include the Lebanese Ministry of Environment, REMPEC (Regional Marine Pollution Emergency Response Center Barcelona Convention to deal with oil and chemical spills and accidents), international NGOs and experts, and civil society around the World.

Cleanup Efforts

Official efforts for clean up through REMPEC, the Ministry of Environment and countries willing to provide assistance will not begin before ceasefire. The Oil Spill team at Green Line is determined to begin, despite siege and in the absence of security guarantees.

The delay caused the highly viscous heavy fuel to solidify; it has emulsified with sea water, formed tar balls, lumps or emulsions, settled on the seabed and traveled further along the coast line. In this effect, Green Line has been coordinating with local NGOs, private sector and the Ministry of Environment to cleanup certain sensitive and highly impacted areas.

Nevertheless, without ceasefire a full-fledged clean up operation can not begin. This makes clean up efforts and costs of clean up greater and mobility of experts and essential equipment fairly impossible. The absence of a pre-spill contingency plan and a complete cleanup plan will hinder cleanup, as well as, the unavailability of sufficient and essential clean-up equipment will hinder the cleanup efforts.

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