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“War in Lebanon Brings About the Biggest Environmental Catastrophe in the History of the Country”

*15,000 Lebanese army troops to be deployed in the South of Lebanon, while a 15,000 tons oil spill hits most of Lebanon’s coast.*

By Wael Hmaidan  
Environmental activist  
Coordinator of Oil Spill Working Group for Environmental NGOs

Beirut, August 9, 2006 - Today, a group of environmental activists, including myself, were assessing a beach called “Ramlet El Beida” which is Arabic for “The White Sands”. Ironically, the 1.5km sand beach is now covered with black oil, killing and polluting everything it touches. We had been going on site for the past three weeks to evaluate the extent of the spill on the Lebanese shores. Every time the horrifying sight of the oil was seen our eyes filled with tears. The tears might also have been due to the nauseating smell of the oil permeating through the air. No one knows. The result is the same though.

The escalating Israeli attacks on Lebanon not only killed civilians and destroyed infrastructure, they also annihilated the environment. Four weeks ago an Israeli air raid on the Jiyeh power plant, south of Beirut, caused a 15,000 ton oil spill into the Mediterranean Sea. What first appeared to be a small contamination of a sandy beach in Beirut turned out to be the worst environmental crisis in Lebanon’s history, affecting more than 100km of the Lebanese coast, from Jiyeh in the South to Chekka in the North. This environmental catastrophe has become regional. Syria has now also reported oil hitting its shores, with huge oil carpets now moving slowly towards Turkey and may also hit Cyprus and Greece if winds and currents are unfavorable.

UNEP has labeled this spill as serious as the infamous Exxon-Valdez spill in Alaska in 1989. The danger of this spill, other than the obvious environment disaster, is the fact that after almost a month from the start of the spill no cleanup operations have even started yet. Each day the cleanup is delayed we allow the oil to settle more into the sand, rocks and seabed. This will not only make the cleanup much more difficult, but would increase the damage to the environment exponentially.

The cleanup operations so far have not begun because of the on going siege and daily arbitrary bombings by Israel. The Israeli air force has hit ambulances, aid trucks and other civilian equipment during the past two weeks. There is no guarantee that they will not target the cleanup operations. Assessment has been difficult as well. Last week, while trying to carry some field work in the North of Lebanon, the road that we were using was hit by an air raid just an hour before we arrived.

Nevertheless, even with all these difficulties, the situation can not wait any longer. The oil is highly toxic and will kill all marine life in its vicinity. It will build up in the marine ecosystem and we will feel its effect for years to come. Several spawning and nursery areas of coastal fish have been decimated, and this will affect the livelihood of fishermen in the future. Also, normally at this time of the year, turtle eggs start to hatch and all baby turtles will need to reach deep waters as fast as possible. If they are hampered by oil they will surely die.

The country’s tourism industry will also suffer. The beach and all businesses connected to the beach are on hold until they are cleaned. The total cost of the cleanup and environmental impact has been estimated to be more than 200 million dollars and increasing. So many lives depend on the sea and Lebanon is a country where nearly half the population lives by the sea. Ceasefire or no ceasefire, cleanup operations must start now so we can save the sea, the marine life and ourselves.