

Greenpeace Exposes Oil slick On The Seabed Off The Lebanese Coast in Jiyeh

Beirut, August 22 2006 – Exclusive underwater footage revealed today that large amounts of the oil slick off the Lebanese coast in Jiyeh has sunk, coating the seabed with a suffocating carpet of heavy fuel oil up to 10cm thick.

At a press conference in Beirut today, Greenpeace and the Lebanese Union of Professional Divers, screened unseen footage showing the underwater oil slick covering an area stretching for at least 100 meters to the West and up to dozens of meters to the North and South.

After six weeks, the oil is still suffocating the coast of Lebanon. From the shore at Jiyeh, the sea looks a beautiful azure blue, but beneath the surface on the seabed the oil continues to kill marine life and poison the water.

Mohammed El-Sarji, the Greenpeace activist and the head of the Lebanese Union of professional Divers who conducted several dives in Jiyeh said “the scene is horrific, the seabed is completely covered with fuel oil which will threaten marine life for many years to come if it is not contained and removed immediately”.

“This discovery in Jiyeh is an indication that much more poisonous oil could be suffocating the seabed all along the coastline; a full coastal assessment is required immediately” added El-Sarji.

An estimated 10,000 to 15,000 tonnes of Fuel Oil 150¹ poured into the Mediterranean Sea following the bombing of the Jiyeh power plant on July 13 and 15. This has contaminated up to 30 areas along 150 km of the Lebanese coast north of Jiyeh; however the full extent of the spill has yet to be fully assessed as aerial surveillance is still not possible due to an air and sea blockade.

Zeina Al Hajj, Greenpeace co-ordinator in Beirut stated “The images are alarming and it is clear that a full assessment of the extent of the oil spill will need underwater investigation along the coast as well as aerial and ground surveillance; the blockade must be lifted for this work to proceed; furthermore increased efforts are

needed to recover as much oil as possible from contaminated areas.” added Al Hajj, “a full damage assessment needs to be carried out to cover all the environmental impacts caused by the war and, as a priority, caused by the spill.”

Responding to the spill was delayed due to the war and oil recovery and mitigation only started 5 weeks after the spill occurred; even now only a limited response is possible due to difficulties in getting more equipment and expertise into the area. The delays are contributing to further contamination². The oil on the seabed could be brought back to the surface with currents and winds and could lead to further contamination of the coastline.

Dr. Rick Steiner, Professor at the University of Alaska and an oil spill expert advising to the Lebanese government and various NGOs said “this might the first time ever that seabed contamination has been documented this clearly. The oil is extensive and very toxic and a we need to find a way to save the marine environment.”

Greenpeace has been working to gather information for a post conflict environmental assessment in Lebanon and will provide the authorities with the details of this seabed contamination. The organisation has offered whatever help it can provide to the regional and national authorities and will be contributing to the mitigation efforts.

Contacts:

Omer Elnaiem, Greenpeace Communications Officer in Beirut,
Mobile: 00961 3755100

Email: oelnaiem@diala.greenpeace.org

Zeina Al Hajj, Greenpeace Co-ordinator in Beirut, Mobile: 00961
70990849

Email: zeina.alhajj@int.greenpeace.org

Mohammed El Sarji,, Head of the Lebanese Union of professional
Divers, Mobile: 00961 3665589

Basma Badran Greenpeace spokes person in Beirut, Mobile:
00961 3797449

Email: bbadran@diala.greenpeace.org

Paul Horsman, Greenpeace, project leader in Istanbul
+905392780467

Nigel Campbell, Chief Media Officer Greenpeace International in Amsterdam, Mobile: 0031 621296908

Images and footage are available upon request; please contact Omer Elnaiem in Beirut.

Notes:

1. Fuel Oil 150 is a slightly less dense and less viscous heavy fuel oil than standard bunker fuel 180. It is probably a blend of bunker fuel and lighter diesel fractions. Fuel oil 150 is considered to be slightly more toxic than the 180 and would lose a higher percentage of these lighter fractions over time through volatilisation to the air.

2. Once oil is in the sea, the so-called lighter (more volatile) parts or fractions are lost through evaporation, degradation and dispersion, especially in warm waters, such that they should present less of an acute toxicity problem. However, it is still possible for these fractions to cause tainting of fish and shellfish, even when they are present at relatively low concentrations. Other more soluble compounds or chemicals are formed as partial breakdown products as the oil starts breaking into smaller droplets and is attacked by microbes that are able to digest the oil.