

Oil spill adds ecological crisis to Lebanon's agony

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**Body:**

Along Lebanon's sandy beaches and rocky headlands runs a belt of black sludge, 10,000 to 30,000 tonnes of oil that spilled into the Mediterranean Sea after Israel bombed a power plant.

Lebanon's Environment Ministry says the oil flooded into the sea when Israeli jets hit storage tanks at the Jiyeh plant south of Beirut on July 13 and 15, creating an ecological crisis that Lebanon's government has neither the money nor the expertise to deal with.

"We have never seen a spill like this in the history of Lebanon. It is a major catastrophe," Environment Minister Yacoub al-Sarraf told Reuters.

"The equipment we have is for minor spills. We use it once in a blue moon to clean a small spill of 50 tonnes or so. To clean this whole thing up we would need an armada ... The cost of a full clean-up could run as high as \$40-50 million."

The spill is especially threatening since fish spawn and sea turtles nest on Lebanon's coast, including the green turtle which is endangered in the Mediterranean, local ecologists say.

Carried by a north-easterly wind, the spill has travelled 70-80 km up the coast of Lebanon, which has been bombarded by Israel for 16 days in a war against Hizbollah.

An Israeli warship damaged by a Hizbollah missile on July 15 may also have spilled diesel oil into the sea, according to the Environment Ministry website ([www.moe.gov.lb](http://www.moe.gov.lb)).

At Beirut's Sporting Club, seven men in navy overalls perch on the edge of a man-made inlet skimming sludge, using buckets on the end of sticks and pouring it into plastic containers.

The ground around them is black, as are their forearms and clothes. The air is thick with acrid fumes that sting the eyes and irritate the throat.

The team is part of a pilot clean-up commissioned by the Environment Ministry. Another mop-up is underway at the San Antoine Sandy Beach Resort in northern Lebanon.

## **MARINE LIFE DEAD**

"It arrived the day after they hit the Jiyeh power plant. The worst has passed now. A couple of days ago the whole coastline was black," said Walid Abu Nassar, surveying the damage to the Sporting Club, which he runs.

"First they tried to pump it out but that didn't work, now this. These are crude methods but Lebanon has no other way."

Lebanon has turned to oil producer Kuwait for help. A plane load of equipment is due to arrive from Kuwait via Syria by the end of the week, Sarraf said.

But one of the main problems is that an Israeli air and sea blockade in place since the war began on July 12 is hampering both the clean-up and the delivery of equipment.

"To really clean it up we need access to the sea, which we don't have," Sarraf said. "We need more equipment and mobilisation but for that we need the hostilities to end."

The migratory season is over so birds should not be badly affected and some oil may evaporate or decompose, but spills can smother or poison sea life, the Environment Ministry says.

Even if Lebanon is able to mop up, the marine ecosystem could take years to recover, local environmentalists say.

Commercial fishing and tourism has been at a standstill since the war began because of the air and sea blockade.

"July is hatching season for turtle eggs and baby turtles have to reach deep water as fast as possible to avoid predators. With the oil in their way, they will not survive," Wael Hmaidan, a local environmental activist said.

"The oil spill, part of which has settled on the sea floor, threatens blue fin tuna, which is an important but overfished commercial fish, as well as shark species."