

# Lebanon Oil Spill Makes Animals Casualties of War

Mati Milstein in Tel Aviv, Israel  
for [National Geographic News](#)  
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Add bluefin tuna and green turtles to the casualties in the Hezbollah-Israel conflict.

Green groups are calling an oil spill along Lebanon's Mediterranean shore the largest environmental crisis in the country's history.



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The spill came after Israeli planes struck a Lebanese power plant, dumping 15,000 tons (13,600 metric tons) of oil into the eastern Mediterranean.

The massive spill has since spread along the length of Lebanon's coastline. Neighboring Syria has also reported oil spots on its beaches.

"Depending on the winds and sea currents, the spill could reach Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus," warned Wael Hmaidan of Lebanon's Green Line Association environmental group.

Hundreds of Lebanese and Israelis have been killed since fighting broke out on July 12.

The conflict erupted after Hezbollah militants abducted two Israeli soldiers in a cross-border attack. (See a [behind-the-scenes photo gallery of Hezbollah](#).)

The Israeli military responded with air, land, and sea attacks that have killed at least 500 Lebanese civilians and Hezbollah militants. At least 51 Israeli civilians and soldiers have been killed in Hezbollah rocket attacks on northern Israel.

In the first week of the conflict, Israeli fighter planes struck the Jiyeh power plant about 25 miles (40 kilometers) south of Beirut ([map of Lebanon](#)).

The attack set ablaze five oil tanks and caused the massive spill along the eastern Mediterranean coast. One of the tanks continues to burn, and officials fear the fire could cause a sixth tank to explode.

## Ecological Disaster

Lebanon's eastern Mediterranean coastline is an important marine environment.

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In July green turtle eggs begin to hatch on Lebanon's beaches, and baby turtles scramble frantically across the sands for the refuge of deep waters.

Oil now covers the beaches, and Hmaidan says the baby green turtles—an endangered species—will suffer extremely high fatalities.



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Lebanese environmental groups said that bluefin tuna—a significant commercial species in the region that has already suffered from overfishing—are also being threatened by the spill. (Read ["Bluefin Tuna in Atlantic Nearing Extinction, Conservation Group Says"](#) [July 24, 2006].)

Hmaidan is traveling the Lebanese coastline to survey and document the scope of the oil spill.

"The images are horrifying," he said. "The oil covers entire beaches and seeps into the sand. The longer it sits on the beach, the harder it will be to clean up ... We don't yet even know the extent of the pollution, because we are still under fire and are not able to survey it properly."

In addition to marine damage caused by the spill, fires at the Jiyeh facility ignited by the Israeli strike continue to pour smoke into Lebanon's skies.

Plumes can be seen from 37 miles (60 kilometers) away, and smoke from Jiyeh blankets Beirut when there are southerly winds.

## Slow Recovery

Cleaning up the spill is now the priority.

But the Lebanese are facing two obstacles—a lack of workers and equipment and an inability to operate cleanup vehicles and ships along the coast due to Israeli military strikes.

In 2003 a 50-ton (45-metric-ton) oil spill dealt a huge blow to Lebanon's coastal environment. At the time Lebanese environmental groups demanded the government acquire cleanup equipment and create contingency plans.

But nothing was done.

"Lebanon has no emergency response plan for such an oil spill," Hmaidan said. "Now this has happened, but we are still not ready. We don't want to blame anyone in the current situation, but we need to act as quickly as possible."

The Lebanese Ministry of the Environment has asked for help from the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) and from the Kuwaiti government. Assistance from Kuwait is expected to arrive in Lebanon early this week.

Hmaidan said the cleanup would take some six months "if we have all the necessary equipment and manpower and permission from the Israeli military."

But he says that Israel is not allowing equipment to operate on Lebanese beaches and has implemented a naval blockade that prohibits ships—also needed in the cleanup effort—from taking to sea.

"We need an immediate cease-fire in order to do the cleanup," Hmaidan said.

Achim Steiner is a UN undersecretary-general and UNEP's executive director. He says the Regional Marine Pollution Emergency Response Center for the Mediterranean Sea (REMPEC) has put together a team of experts ready to assist with the cleanup when hostilities cease.

Steiner said the spill is "rapidly taking on a regional dimension. We must also be concerned about the short- and long-term impacts on the marine environment, including the biodiversity upon which so many people depend for their livelihoods and living, via tourism and fishing."

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