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## **War in Lebanon Brings About the Biggest Environmental Catastrophe in the History of the Country 15,000 ton Oil Spill from Jiyeh Power Plant Hits Most of the Lebanese Coast**

The escalating Israeli attack on Lebanon did not only kill its civilians and destroy its infrastructure, but it is also annihilating its environment. Last week a 15,000 ton oil spill resulted from the Israeli air raid on the Jiyeh power plant South of Lebanon. The power plant has 6 fuel tanks. Four of them have burned completely, while the fifth one, which is also the main cause of the spill, is still burning. The Lebanese ministry of environment is worried that the sixth tank, which is underground, is going to explode.

The oil slick appeared for the first time last week on the once beautiful beach of Ramlet El-Beida in Beirut, which used to be the only public beach in the Lebanese capital. Upon this finding, several environmental activists alerted the media on the spill, which in turn has mobilized the municipality of Beirut and the Ministry of Environment. After a few days of investigation it became obvious that more than 100km of the Lebanese coast, from Jiyeh in the South to Chekka in the North has been hit by this oil spill.

This is definitely one of the worst environmental crisis in Lebanese history, declared a group of local environmental NGOs working on this issue (1). Just for the sake of comparison, in 2003 a 50 ton oil spill in the North was a huge blow to the Lebanese coastal environment. The current spill is 300 times bigger, and there is a big possibility that more oil will go into the sea.

These NGOs added that the Mediterranean marine environment will suffer tremendously for several years from this spill. The Lebanese coast is a very important site for fish spawning and sea turtle nesting, including the green turtle, which is an endangered species in the Mediterranean.

During the month of July, turtle eggs start to hatch and all baby turtles will need to reach deep waters as fast as possible. With the oil slick in their way baby turtles will have no chance of making it. Also, Blue Fin Tuna, which is a very important commercial species in the Mediterranean and which has been under severe stress from over-fishing, are present in the Eastern Mediterranean coastal water in this period of the year. The oil spill, of which part of it has settled on the sea floor, will threaten the blue fin tuna and other fish species spawning areas.

Another important impact of the spill is the effect on tourism in the future. The Lebanese coast is an important tourist destination, and after the war ends, Lebanon will need every source of income to rebuild its infrastructure. Now the beautiful Lebanese white beaches are covered with a black layer and the smell of fuel can be smelled a good distance in land, rendering them toxic and useless.

This oil spill is bigger than what the local authority can handle and urgent help is needed from outside, declared the NGOs. The Ministry of Environment has organized a team to follow on this issue, and have requested help from the United Nations Environmental Program and the Regional Marine Pollution Emergency Response Center for the Mediterranean (REMPEC). The Ministry of Environment in Kuwait has also promised to send equipment and expertise to help in the clean up. “We are in constant communication with the Ministry of Environment, and as Lebanese NGOs we are ready to help in the clean up when the necessary equipment arrive.

Nevertheless, the constant Israeli air raids will make the operation very difficult, and an immediate cease fire is needed if we want to save Lebanon and its environment (2),” concluded the NGOs.

Notes to editor:

(1) The Lebanese environmental NGOs include: Bahr Lubnan Association, Union of Professional Divers, and Green Line Association; which are prominent local Non-Governmental Organizations known for their work in protecting the Mediterranean Sea in Lebanon.

(2) Other Environmental impacts of this war include air pollution and chemical spills due to the targeting of industrial factories, fuel bunkers, and other flammable structures; the use of depleted uranium in Israeli bombs, and the huge waste and sanitary crisis resulting from the 750,000 refugees in Lebanon, which can lead to water pollution and the spread of diseases.