Thousands of tons of oil pollute Spanish coast

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An ecological disaster of terrible magnitude has taken place and hundreds of thousands of people have lost their livelihoods as a consequence of the break up of the oil tanker *Prestige* off the north west coast of Spain. The future of many others resident in the area is in jeopardy after the tanker, broken in two, dived to the bottom of the sea with its cargo of nearly 60,000 tons of oil.

As people in Galicia make vain attempts to clear their coastline with buckets and spades and even their bare hands, Spain's right-wing Peoples Party government has come under bitter attack for its negligence, incompetence and callousness in dealing with the disaster.

The 979-foot, 26-year-old *Prestige* was carrying fuel oil loaded at St Petersburg in Russia, reportedly on route to the Far East, when it became caught in high winds and up to 26-foot waves. On November 13 it began to list just 31 miles off the cost of Galicia. Oil began to escape from the tanker and reach the Spanish coast. Theories of what holed the vessel vary from a container to tree trunks that had been recently lost by another ship.

The Greek captain of the vessel, Apostulus Maguras, reportedly asked the Spanish authorities for a port of refuge where he might unload his cargo and repair the damage to his ship. Maguras says his request was denied. He was later arrested and is in prison with bail set at three million euros ($3 million).

However, it has been confirmed that the Spanish authorities ordered the *Prestige* to leave Spanish waters and head beyond the 120-mile territorial limit. The doomed tanker was hauled out to sea by tugs straining against the winds and tide. There is no doubt that this strenuous journey widened the crack in the hull, causing the tanker to break in two and sink.

"There was time and the conditions to transfer the cargo to another ship and avoid this problem. It was not done and we don't know why not. It does not seem logical," said Luis Suarez of the Worldwide Fund for Nature.

At one point the Spanish government apparently toyed with the idea of bombing the vessel to provoke a fire that would burn out the entire oil cargo. Fears that the entire Galician coast would catch fire dissuaded the authorities from doing so. Once the ship had been pushed out onto the high seas, the Portuguese government sent a warship to prevent the *Prestige* entering its waters.

The ship remained afloat for seven days, until is sank on November 19. It is estimated that during that time and following its break up, the tanker discharged 20,000 tons of its 77,000 cargo—affecting 92 beaches with 40 totally covered. The oil slick extended to about 250 miles. The affected area supports a rich and diverse fishing and aqua culture industry, including the cultivation of mussels, oysters, spider crab, octopus, sole, rays and turbot and several other species of specialist fish and shellfish. Environmental concerns are mainly focused on sites of international importance for birds.

The oil is highly persistent, will not break up quickly and lies low in the water so is less affected by winds. Nobody knows where the oil on the surface of the sea, and the possible further slicks released from the sunken ship, will go. In the last couple of days new slicks have been spotted off the northern coast of Asturias and the area has been put on high alert. France and Portugal also remain on alert.

The disaster will ruin thousands of families. In the weeks before and after Christmas, fishermen normally make enough to make up for the slow months of the summer.

Not only did the Spanish government fail to safeguard the area and provide information to its inhabitants following the sinking—many only learnt of the extent of the threat from photographs taken by the European Space Agency— but it has continued to minimise the dangers posed.

The government claims that the remaining oil cargo will solidify on the bottom of the sea where it will remain but experts forecast that the tanker hull could burst under the pressure of almost 4,000 metres of water, potentially releasing a cargo twice as big as the *Exxon Valdez* when it sunk in Alaska in 1989, causing what was regarded until then as the worst spill in history.

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The effects of the sinking of the *Prestige* are likely to persist for decades. As well as the damage to employment and the environment, the oil spill will increase the risk that people could be exposed to cancer-causing materials by eating fish contaminated with hydrocarbons. Some experts have warned that even if the cargo stays on the seabed, compressed and turned into a heavy waxy substance by the cold and extreme pressures, heavy metals will leach into the water and enter the food chain. Thilo Maack of Greenpeace stated: “The (toxins will) accumulate, and man is at the end of the food chain, so we will be paid back.”

The autonomous government of Galicia has also been heavily criticised for its response to the crisis. A motion of censure has been tabled by the Socialist Party of Spain (PSOE) in Galicia against the president of La Xunta, Manuel Fraga (an 80-year-old who was a minister in the fascist Franco regime). He stands accused of abandoning Galicia to go hunting in Toledo and Aranjuez, near Madrid, while the oil was covering a large part of his region and only visiting the area for a few minutes and a photo opportunity eight days after the disaster.

There is also anger over the government’s decision to top up the 30 euros per day compensation to affected families provided by Galicia, with a miserable 10 euros extra for just six months. Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar has yet to visit the affected area.

Demonstrations were held in Vigo to demand measures to prevent new shipping catastrophes, while in Arosa 40 people representing different aspects of sea life have locked themselves in the council chambers. Many others are picketing the council in support of the lock-in. They are demanding barriers to prevent the pollution of their beaches. The government has stated that it will not provide barriers until oil is visibly approaching.

The incident has highlighted the anarchic character of the shipping industry, which is used by major corporations to avoid regulations and taxes. The *Prestige* was a Liberian-owned vessel, with a Greek captain, crewed by Filipinos and registered in the Bahamas. Its former owner was Mare Shipping Inc., based in the Liberian capital of Monrovia. It was therefore supposed to fly the flag of its nation of registry, i.e. Liberia. But the tanker had been leased to a Greek company, Universal Maritime Ltd, under “bareboat charter”. Bareboat charters are responsible for the operation of the ship, including finding a crew and assuming liability for accidents. The latter then reregistered the ship in the Bahamas, an example of what is known as dual registration or “double flagging”. This practice is largely illegal, but some countries make exceptions for bareboat charters. The Bahamas is such a country.

Flying so-called “flags of convenience” such as Liberia or Panama is a common practice in international shipping, as it offers lower fees, less restrictive laws and access to low-wage crews.

The *Prestige* was chartered by Crown Resources, based in Switzerland, a subsidiary of Alfa Group, a Russian industrial and banking conglomerate owned by Mikhail Fridman, a Moscow businessman, rated as one of the world’s richest men by Forbes. Fridman heads one of Russia’s largest conglomerates which takes in oil exploration, banking, telecommunications, food, vodka and supermarkets.

It is thought that Crown Resources could still benefit from the shipwreck through a healthy compensation on the part of the insurers. According to commercial oil sources, if the company has taken up a normal policy it could receive approximately one million US dollars. Had the *Prestige* sold its cargo of 77,000 tons of fuel in Singapore, it would have made only half a million dollars.

For years there have been demands for tankers to be built with double hulls to prevent this sort of accident. But according to current figures, there are still 5,000 single hull oil and chemical tankers out of a total of 7,300 tankers registered in the world.

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