

Ship grounding creates New Zealand's worst environmental disaster

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Hundreds of tonnes of oil spilling from the cargo ship Rena have begun washing up on nearby beaches and killing marine and bird life. Rena ran aground on the Astrolabe Reef, 20 kms off the New Zealand port of Tauranga, on October 5th. A spokesman for the conservative National Party-led government, Environment Minister Nick Smith, has admitted that the unfolding crisis is the country's "worst maritime environmental disaster".

The situation has deteriorated over recent days as high seas have battered the stricken container ship, and it now appears on the verge of breaking in two. Efforts to offload 1,400 tonnes of fuel oil and 200 tonnes of diesel have repeatedly failed. Oil gushing from the ruptured hull has spread faster and further than the authorities expected, discharging at five-fold the rate it had during the first six days of the grounding. Congealed oil has appeared on the coast as far as 40kms from the grounding site.

The beachside suburbs of Mount Maunganui and Papamoa, which adjoin the harbour entrance, are densely populated and their pristine surroundings attract thousands of summer holiday-makers. A marine ecologist with the National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research, Drew Lohrer, predicts the toxic wastes washing up on the shoreline could "take years or decades" to disappear naturally.

More than 70 shipping containers have fallen from Rena, with some reaching Motiti Island off the coast of Tauranga and local beaches. The containers often float just below the surface and are difficult to track. On Thursday night, the Port of Tauranga had to suspend operations due to the threat posed by rogue containers in shipping lanes.

Defying calls from officials, frustrated locals have begun trying to clear potentially toxic waste off the beaches, which have now been closed to the public. Many people have expressed anger at the slow response by authorities, noting that almost nothing was done during the first three days after the grounding, when the weather was fine. The air is becoming so toxic that Maritime NZ (MNZ) officials are considering issuing masks to residents.

An audience of 300 at a Tauranga public meeting on Tuesday criticised officials in attendance. Residents demanded to know whether the shipping company would pay for repopulating the affected wildlife areas, what dangerous cargo was aboard and what would happen if the ship sank. A Greenpeace representative drew loud applause when he called on Environment Minister Smith to stop using the oil dispersant Corexit 9500. The minister was heckled as he tried to defend the chemical, with some shouting, "It's banned overseas." One woman demanded to know why 18,000 metres of protective boom in an Auckland warehouse was not being used.

Government spokesmen claimed bewilderment over the grounding, saying that the reef was clearly marked on nautical maps and the ship had run into it at full speed in good weather. The captain—described by the ship's owners as an experienced master with an "exemplary record"—and a navigational officer have been charged under Section 65 of the Maritime Act which covers "dangerous activity" involving ships. More charges are expected to follow.

It is becoming increasingly evident that the grounding was a disaster waiting to happen, for which the authorities were totally unprepared. Despite its proximity to the country's second busiest trading port, the Astrolabe Reef

has no visual markings or radar reflection device. On the day the Rena struck the reef, MNZ reportedly declined an offer of two inflatable barges which could have pumped out up to 100 tonnes of oil at a time. A MNZ spokesman said the offer was logged with its operations division, and “if they needed it they would have followed it up.”

As with two other major disasters in the past year—the Pike River mine explosion which killed 29 miners last November, and the Christchurch earthquakes in which 182 people died—the deadly consequences of government and corporate cost-cutting designed to boost private profits are again being exposed.

Unsafe conditions have come to dominate the shipping industry over the past two decades. Under the so-called “open coast” policy introduced by the National government in the early 1990s and maintained by subsequent Labour administrations, deregulation has become the norm. In 2002 a flag of convenience ship, the Jody F. Millennium ran aground in Gisborne and polluted 8kms of coast with 25 tonnes of oil.

The Liberian-registered Rena had been allowed to continue operating despite faults identified during previous inspections in China and Australia. According to the Maritime Union, “multiple deficiencies” were found in an MNZ inspection of the vessel at the port of Bluff on September 26. This included issues with its charts as well as maintenance and equipment, main engine propulsion, covers and doors, lifeboats stowage, emergency fire pump and the auxiliary engine. Despite these problems, the vessel was allowed to proceed. Onerous and exploitative working conditions also prevailed on board. The ship had made four port calls in the five days before the grounding, with her captain and officers working around the clock loading and discharging cargo.

Behind the Rena are powerful and wealthy maritime companies. The vessel is currently on a five-year charter to the Geneva-based Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC), the world’s second largest container shipping corporation. The Rena is one of 18 ships the company charters in New Zealand to transport goods to Asia. MSC refused to accept any responsibility for the state of the Rena or its management, insisting this rested with the vessel’s owner, Costamare Inc. Costamare is owned by a family of Greek multi-millionaires and boasts a fleet of some 60 container vessels.

Writing in the *New Zealand Herald* on October 12, commentator Brian Rudman noted that a formal review of New Zealand’s Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response Capability, released in June this year, expressed concerns about many of the issues that have now emerged. Conducted by leading Australian maritime consultancy Thompson Clarke Shipping, it identified various issues that should be addressed to “significantly” improve MNZ’s “capability to respond”.

The review noted that “it is essential that on-site response agencies have access to equipment that is not only effective but of a size and weight that facilitates quick deployment if the potential effects of an oil spill are to be mitigated successfully at an early stage.” A PricewaterhouseCoopers Audit of marine oil spill preparedness from 2001 reports council and port officials complaining of MNZ equipment being bulky and labour-intensive and not suitable for rapid deployment. Successive New Zealand governments have done nothing to rectify the situation.

The review also expressed surprise at the “hands off” approach of port companies, including the operator of Marsden Point, the country’s only oil refinery. Under the corporatised model contained in the Port Companies Act, introduced by Labour in 1988, “the principal objective of every port company is to operate as a successful business.” The act specifically excludes them from taking on the previous harbour board’s statutory functions “relating to safety or good navigation”.

In the face of growing anger over the government’s handling of the crisis, Prime Minister John Key declared that whoever was responsible for the disaster would be held “to account”. He admitted, however, that because the ship company’s insurance liability was capped, it was likely “the taxpayer” would have to pick up the rest of the bill. In other words, corporate culpability and government indifference will again go unpunished while the multi-million dollar costs of trying to rectify the damage will be borne by ordinary people.



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