

Cargo ship grounded in New Zealand breaks apart

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The container ship Rena, which was grounded on the Astrolabe Reef, 20 kilometres off the New Zealand port of Tauranga, has broken in two following storms earlier this month. The conservative National Party-led government's environment minister, Nick Smith, admitted it was the country's "worst maritime environmental disaster."

When the 47,000-tonne cargo vessel hit the reef on October 5, it spilled 400 tonnes of oil, fouling stretches of pristine coastline, affecting wildlife and releasing shipping containers into the ocean. The rupture of the Rena over the weekend of January 7–8 has worsened the crisis, with more cargo and debris washing up on the beaches of popular holiday destinations around Mount Maunganui.

While salvage operators had removed most of the oil and cargo from the vessel before it broke apart, about 880 containers were still on board. More than 150 are thought to have fallen overboard in the past fortnight, either washing ashore or splitting apart and spilling freight such as timber and bags of milk powder. At least 32 containers carried dangerous goods, three times the number declared on the ship's official manifest. Small amounts of oil have hit beaches 25 kilometres east of Tauranga.

By law, the Rena will have to be removed, even if it sinks the 80 to 90 metres to the seabed. Salvors also face one of the most dangerous and expensive underwater operations undertaken in New Zealand to try to recover hundreds of containers. The ship's stern, which has about 400 containers in its hold, is 75 percent submerged on the reef, and in a precarious and unstable position.

The political establishment has scapegoated the Rena's captain and navigation officer for the disaster. The two Philippine nationals, whose names have been

suppressed, were arrested immediately following the grounding and charged under the Maritime Transport Act for "operating a vessel in a manner causing unnecessary danger or risk." The charge carries a maximum penalty of 12 months in prison or a fine of \$10,000.

The two men were also charged under the Resources Management Act for the "discharge of harmful substances from ships or offshore installations," which can result in two years' imprisonment, or a \$300,000 fine and an additional \$10,000 for each day the pollution continues. Last month, the captain faced four fresh charges, and the navigation officer three more, for allegedly altering the ship's documents in the wake of the grounding. Each charge carries a penalty of up to seven years' imprisonment. While the pair is on bail, immigration authorities vindictively refused to grant their wives visas to visit them over the Christmas holiday period.

In October, Prime Minister John Key asserted that it was incomprehensible that the ship could run into a well-charted reef at full speed in clear weather. In fact, ships' captains are under constant pressure to reduce costs by speeding up operations and ignoring regulations. This is particularly the case transiting ports, as the Rena was, where any delay means significant additional costs.

Maritime expert John Riding told TV3 News on January 10 that unlike many countries, New Zealand operates no regulated shipping lanes. Instead "guidelines" recommend, for instance, that ships remain three nautical miles clear of a charted reef. Having tracked ships' movements over a long period of time, Riding says that the guidelines are ignored "almost daily" by ships' masters. Riding's call for the government to legislate dedicated shipping lanes was

promptly dismissed by Transport Minister Gerry Brownlee as an “over-reaction,” saying they would be “too expensive” to establish and administer.

The Rena is typical of the flag-of-convenience ships that now dominate the industry. Registered in Liberia, it was so substandard that repairs had been ordered following half of its inspections over the past 36 months. It had been allowed to continue operating despite uncorrected faults being identified during two previous inspections in China and Australia.

The ship was operating on charter to the Mediterranean Shipping Company, the world’s second largest container corporation. Its parent company, Costamare, is owned by a family of Greek multi-millionaires. Costamare is valued at \$US260 million and boasts a fleet of some 60 container vessels, one of the largest in size and capacity in the world. Costamare, which is in talks with the government, has so far refused to reveal how much of the estimated \$US20 million salvage and clean-up costs it will cover.

Green Party spokesman Gareth Hughes called for a royal commission to investigate the disaster and Maritime NZ’s management of the commercial waterways. Hughes said there were “too many unanswered questions” on the grounding, the response of government agencies and the impact of deregulation on coastal shipping.

The Greens’ posturing, which is designed to tap into deep public concern over deteriorating environmental standards, is entirely cynical. A royal commission will not identify the underlying causes but cover them up. In the current inquiry into the deaths of 29 miners in the 2010 explosion at the Pike River coal mine, the presiding judge opened the hearings with a declaration that the commission was “not a trial” and “there would be no winners and losers.”

During November’s general election, the Green Party highlighted its record of working “constructively” with both National and Labour Party governments. Last September, the Greens signalled a growing alignment with the National Party by voting for its Exclusive Economic Zone and Continental Shelf Bill, which is designed to facilitate “economic development.” The legislation allows deep water gas and oil exploration beyond New Zealand’s 12-mile territorial limit and, despite international experiences such as the BP disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, contains extremely

limited environmental safeguards.



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