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Regional cooperation vital for addressing marine pollution issue

Faiza Ilyas | January 13, 2015



KARACHI: India is yet to sign a memorandum of understanding on marine pollution preparedness and response already signed by the Maldives, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The relevant plan would come into force once all five countries, member of the South Asia Cooperative Environment Programme (SACEP), sign the document.

This was pointed out on the first day of a two-day workshop on Monday. The event, Enhancing regional cooperation mechanism on marine pollution preparedness and response in the SACEP region, was organised by the Pakistan Maritime Security Agency (PMSA). It's the first national workshop on the subject.

While the discussion's main focus was the various aspects of preparedness and response to an oil spill disaster, it also highlighted that regional countries had been too slow to develop and adopt a coordinated strategy with clear-cut roles and commitments.

"Oil spill knows no boundaries. You have to look beyond your borders and have a bigger picture in really understanding the marine pollution threat and preparing for an effective response," said George J. Franklin, who possesses 40 years of experience in oil shipping and now running his own firm and providing consultancy to international maritime organisation (IMO).

The key to an effective oil/chemical spill response, he pointed out, was to get ahead of the game. "You have to be proactive, proactive and proactive and not reactive. Pre-planning and exercise is the key to an effective response for which one should have a fast-track system at every strategy level, allowing easy and swift access to expert help," he said.

According to Mr Franklin, there has been a drastic decline in the number of tanker-spill cases while the number of offshore spills from oil/gas exploration activities has increased. "The latter is more dangerous as in that case you don't know the exact size of the oil spill," he explained.

Funds to acquire expertise in the area, he said, were available with the international convention on oil pollution preparedness, response and cooperation but interested countries needed to ratify it first.

Risk assessment and mapping of the sensitive areas, he said, was important in order to target an area and allocate resources during an emergency.

Giving a presentation on the status and historical background of the oil spill contingency plan in the South Asian Seas Region, senior programme officer (regional) at SACEP Pulakesh Mondol said that a draft of South Asian marine pollution emergency action plan was prepared back in 1989 but could not be finalised.

After holding multiple meetings, officials of the five regional countries developed a preliminary draft of an MoU on response to oil and chemical pollution and circulated it for further consideration in 1999.

“Four member countries have already signed the MoU; Maldives in 2009, Pakistan and Bangladesh in 2010 and Sri Lanka in December 2014,” he said, adding that India had signalled that it would sign the document in three weeks.

The MoU and regional plan, he said, would enter into force three months after the Secretariat of the South Asian Seas Programme (SASP) would notify by all five countries of their acceptance of the agreement in accordance with their national legislation.

On South Asia’s vulnerability to marine pollution, he said the region lay close to the main shipping route from the Middle East to the Far East Asia. About 25 per cent of the total world movement of crude oil by sea passed through this area. The trade routes link Karachi, Mumbai, Chittagong and Colombo with East African and South African ports.

“The region imports much of its oil for consumption,” he said, adding that currently India was undertaking oil exploration activities while Sri Lanka and Bangladesh were looking at possibilities.

He referred to last year’s major oil spill in Bangladesh and said that the country had no system in place to contain spread of oil that entered the ecologically sensitive mangrove area and caused a massive damage.

“Around 400,000 litres of oil was discharged into the sea when a tanker collided with another vessel. People were seen using traditional methods to clear the area,” he said.

National consultant SACEP Muzaffar Mehmood briefed the audience about the salient features of the National Maritime Disaster Management Plan approved in 2008.

He also cited various local laws that covered the subject of marine pollution.

Pakistan, he said, had been regularly conducting exercises to prepare for an oil spill disaster. The last such exercise was conducted in 2014. “Pakistan daily imports 50,000 tonnes of oil whereas about 550 million tonnes of oil required by other countries also transit through our sea boundaries annually,” he said.

Earlier, PMSA Director General Rear Admiral Ather Mukhtar welcomed the guests on behalf of his organisation and underlined the need for regional cooperation to address the challenge of marine pollution.

“No nation can alone address the challenge of marine pollution. Coordination efforts are a key to meet the challenges posed by oil/chemical spill,” he said, hoping to see the MoU signed by all regional states for its early implementation.

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