

Sri Lanka seeks \$40 million for X-Press Pearl damages

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The ship's cargo poses a major threat of environmental pollution to the area, as the vessel was carrying 1,486 containers with 25 tons of Nitric Acid, several other chemicals, and cosmetics.



Sri Lankan authorities have filed a claim with the operator of the ill-fated feeder X-Press Pearl seeking \$40 million to compensate for the environmental damages caused by the ship's sinking.

An interim claim has been lodged with Singapore-based X-Press Feeders, according to Sri Lanka's Ports and Shipping Minister Rohitha Abeygunawardena, cited by AFP.

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The ministry also plans to seek compensation for costs incurred from firefighting efforts.

The chemical-laden feeder containership X-Press Pearl sank on June 2 and touched the sea bottom off Colombo Port in Sri Lanka after burning for almost two weeks.

The ship’s cargo poses a major threat of environmental pollution to the area, as the vessel was carrying 1,486 containers with 25 tons of Nitric Acid, several other chemicals, and cosmetics.

As reported previously, a considerable number of pallets with chemicals are believed to have ended up in the sea causing massive damage to the marine environment in the area.

Local media reports indicate that bodies of turtles, sea mammals, seabirds, and fish have been washing up on the country’s beaches.

An investigation into whether these deaths have been caused by the sinking is said to be underway. Based on the update from the ship’s operator from June 12, the wreck remains on the seabed at a depth of about 21 meters, with the forward section afloat and reported to be stable.

“Observations from the salvors who remain on scene with the Sri Lankan Navy and Indian Coast Guard are that there has been no noticeable fuel oil spill,” the company said. However, X-Press Feeders added that a grey sheen continues to be observed emanating from the vessel.

“Discolouration of the sea has been apparent since the vessel’s stern became submerged, and the remnants of the cargo in the 1486 containers that were onboard were exposed to water,” the company statement further reads.

As informed, representatives of Oil Spill Response Limited (OSRL) and International Tanker Owners Pollution Federation (ITOPF) are monitoring updates from the scene and remain on standby to be deployed in case of any reported spill.

”The salvors will remain on scene to deal with any possible debris supported by the Sri Lankan Navy and the Indian Coast Guard, who have oil spill response capabilities on standby,” the vessel operator added. Meanwhile, Kitack Lim, Secretary-General of the IMO, voiced concern over the impact of the incident.

“We are closely monitoring the situation as it evolves, including reports of chemical pollution, debris coming ashore in the form of plastic pellets, and the potential for oil pollution,” Lim noted. IMO is liaising with UNEP and OCHA and with the South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP), the regional organization for South Asia, with regards to possible assistance.

Lim added that the IMO was also in communication with the Sri Lankan Ministry of Environment (MEPA) for any specific technical assistance that IMO may provide.

Clean-up efforts of the debris that washed up ashore from the wreck remain underway, as explained by the Chairperson of Marine Environment Protection Authority Dharshani Lahandapura.

Nearly 1,000 metric tons of hazardous waste have been collected so far and are being stored at a storage facility, which will then proceed with the waste disposal in line with environmental regulations.

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The FSO has not been inspected or maintained since 2015 and has been out of class since 2016, leading to serious concerns about its integrity.



The international efforts carried out over the past year to assess the risk of a massive oil leak or explosion from the Safer, a stricken FSO moored off the coast of Yemen, have been largely unsuccessful.

The condition of the floating storage and offloading unit, which is anchored 60 km north of the port of Hodeidah, continues to deteriorate. Namely, the stricken oil tanker is loaded with 1.1 million barrels (over 140,000 tonnes) of oil, which could be released into the sea as the 400,000-tonne tanker had no maintenance since 2014.

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Speaking at the beginning of this month before the UN Security Council, Inger Andersen, Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), said Houthi militias were using the vessel as a 'bargaining chip' to advance their political agenda.

“Political and logistical gridlock in assessing the risk of an oil spill or explosion in the Red Sea are increasing the likelihood of a new humanitarian and environmental crisis in Yemen, and beyond,” Andersen believes.

An oil leak could force the vital Hudaydah port to close, limiting food and fuel imports for two to three weeks and block 50 percent of fishing grounds, “with an estimate economic cost of around \$350 million over five years”, she said.

The country is already suffering from a massive humanitarian crisis resulting from the armed conflict that has been brewing for over six years.

Prior to the conflict in Yemen, the ultra-large crude carrier built in 1976, was converted to an FSO in 1986. Since 1988, it has been moored at Ras Isa where it had been receiving, storing and exporting crude oil flowing from the Marib oil fields.

It is owned by Yemen’s national oil company, the Safer Exploration & Production Operation Company (SEPOC).

The FSO has not been inspected or maintained since 2015 and has been out of class since 2016, leading to serious concerns about its integrity.

The UN has been briefed 23 times on this issue over the past two years, however, there has been limited progress regarding United Nations efforts to gain access to the vessel. Namely, no mission has been able to deploy, because, as disclosed by UN representatives, Ansar Allah (Houthi) authorities, while agreeing in principle to such an operation, are reluctant to provide assurances to the UN it can proceed.

Over the last 10 days, extensive discussions have taken place to bridge gaps, without success, Andersen said.

“The main sticking point is around what the United Nations would exactly do on the Safer and why the organization is unable to specify what repairs will be carried out.

However, because no technical mission has been able to access the tanker, it is not possible to determine what condition it is in or what work must be done.

The expert team needs to verify what it is dealing with and what can be done, in addition to carrying out some light maintenance to minimize the risk of an oil spill and hopefully buy more time,” she pointed out. As disclosed, the expert team will remain on standby so long as donor funds are available, adding that, once a green light is given, it will still require several weeks to charter vessels, gather equipment and set off from Djibouti to the Safer.

The urgency of the issue and potential humanitarian disaster could result in \$20 billion in damages, reaching well beyond the Red Sea.

Furthermore, it is assessed that an oil spill or explosion could severely restrict the movement of vessels through one of the busiest commercial routes in the world, posing devastating consequences for the wealth of species found in the region.

Commenting on the risks posed by the FSO, Greenpeace said that the question was not if but when an accident would happen. As disclosed, last year, the engine room flooded and emergency repairs were carried out; the fire extinguishing equipment no longer functions and most recently the inert gas system necessary to prevent explosions has broken down.

“All parties involved should do what is necessary to secure the diplomatic solution that would ensure a technical assessment of the Safer as a matter of urgency, to determine the status, identify immediate requirements as well as plans for ensuring the safe transfer of the oil onto another seaworthy vessel,” Greenpeace said, adding that plans for the worst-case scenario are also needed.

“The International Maritime Organization (IMO) needs to step up to its responsibility in its mandate to ensure that plans are made and the necessary expertise and equipment are in place to respond rapidly to any unfolding disaster as a result of the Safer.”

According to Andersen, coordination mechanisms have been created to be deployed in case of an oil spill.

Through those mechanisms, relevant stakeholders, including the Regional Organization for the Conservation of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, Yemeni authorities and IMO, have developed regional and national contingency plans, as well as contracted a private company to provide updates in the event of a spill.

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