



IMO Briefing



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UN agencies and regional Governments to co-ordinate in Eastern Mediterranean oil spill response

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) is to collaborate in efforts to mount a co-ordinated response from UN agencies and other concerned parties, including regional Governments, to the oil spill currently affecting the coastal and marine environments of Lebanon and Syria. The spill, estimated to be one of the largest ever to affect the Mediterranean, follows an incident in mid-July in which an oil storage unit at a power plant in Jiyeh, 30 km south of Beirut, sustained bombing damage during the current conflict hostilities.

To enhance further the support that IMO, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and other partners are already providing to minimize the impact of the oil pollution incident, **Mr. Efthimios Mitropoulos, Secretary-General of IMO, and Mr. Achim Steiner, Executive Director of UNEP, are to convene a co-ordination meeting in Piraeus, Greece, on Thursday, 17 August 2006.**

The meeting is to be hosted by Mr. Manolis Kefaloyannis, Minister of Mercantile Marine of Greece and will be attended by, among others, Mr. Stavros Dimas, European Commissioner for the Environment. The meeting's objective will be to agree a common strategy to address the pollution currently affecting the marine environment adjacent to the Lebanese and Syrian coasts; identify preparatory actions to face the possibility of the oil spill threat extending to the marine environment of neighbouring countries; and consider possible financial and other support for the implementation of the strategy to be agreed, which would start as soon as developments in the region may allow.

Since learning of the incident, IMO and UNEP have been consulting each other, and other co-competent entities, being extremely sensitive to the potential damage that may be caused to the coastal and marine environments of the countries in the Eastern Mediterranean. To that effect, they have been monitoring the situation closely (see IMO Briefing 27/2006) and, through the Regional Marine Pollution Emergency Response Centre for the Mediterranean Sea (REMPEC), which is administered jointly by the two Organizations, scientific studies and, where feasible, technical field missions have already been initiated to identify the most appropriate response actions. Both containing and combating the pollution already affecting Lebanon and Syria and ensuring that preparations are made to mitigate any adverse impact there may be on other neighbouring countries, however small the probability may seem at this time, are among the key objectives.

At this stage, it is envisaged that the Piraeus meeting will be attended by representatives of Cyprus, Greece, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey, the European Commission, the United Nations Development Programme, the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, REMPEC, IMO and UNEP.

Commenting on the meeting under preparation, Mr. Mitropoulos stated that, “although the spill and the ensuing environmental damage has not been caused by a shipping-related operation or accident, IMO was conscious to contribute to any effort undertaken to mitigate the impact of the serious pollution incident currently harming the waters adjacent to the coasts of Lebanon and Syria; to advise on the clean-up operation to be undertaken as soon as the circumstances so allow; and to assist other countries in the region to take all necessary preparatory measures to face any potential threat of the spill spreading over their waters”. He praised the co-operation and assistance IMO is receiving from all partners in this difficult exercise and urged donor countries and organizations to contribute as best they can to the concerted effort to achieve the common goals.

Expert mission established

Following a request for assistance by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to REMPEC, Dr. Ezio Amato, Senior Scientific Researcher at ICRAM (Istituto Centrale per la Ricerca scientifica e tecnologica Applicata al Mare) and Chairman of the IMO Technical Group on oil pollution preparedness and response (hazardous and noxious substances), has been sent to Syria to carry out an assessment of the situation in that country.

Dr. Amato travelled to Syria within the framework of a technical mission fielded by IMO/REMPEC and the Joint UNEP-OCHA Environment Unit (UNEP/UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs), joining Mr. Rene Nijenhuis of the latter's Environmental Emergencies Section.

In addition to the assessment of the situation on site, the experts will also consider, as far as possible, logistical aspects of the transport of oil spill clean-up and response equipment that could be made available, as well as its transfer to Syria and to Lebanon, through Syria.

IMO – the International Maritime Organization – is the United Nations specialized agency with responsibility for the safety and security of shipping and the prevention of marine pollution by ships.

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