

X-Press Pearl: cargo pollution spreads, but no oil leaks detected

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The sea around the containership **X-Press Pearl** (IMO 9875343), which caught fire off Sri Lanka on May 20th and subsequently burned itself out over two weeks before eventually foundering in 21 metres of water, has been reported as suffering significant pollution from more than 40 different types of chemicals that were stored inside the containers on board the ship.

Local authorities, assisted by international experts, have been taking samples of the water regularly. Containers and wreckage have been washing up on the beaches along a coastal stretch of 150kms. At the moment the major concern was the mass of microplastics, which cannot practically be contained or collected. Its impact on the marine environment has not yet been measured, although it was reported that dead fish, sea turtles and dolphins with traces of microplastics in them had washed up on the shore.

According to the International Tanker Owners' Pollution Federation, which has two representatives in Sri Lanka assisting, no oil pollution has been reported onshore. Late last week Sri Lanka officials conducted a briefing to detail the scope of the environmental damage resulting from the fire and sinking of the vessel.

Government representatives and the shipping line continued to rebut the reports of additional pollution and possible oil leaks from the vessel, which remains partially submerged off Colombo. At the same time, additional international aid was being sent to help the country deal with what has been called the worst environmental disaster in the history of Sri Lanka.

After reviewing the manifests from the vessel's cargo, Sri Lankan officials reported that the vessel was carrying 193 different items. In addition to the 25 tons of nitric acid, other chemicals including methanol and sodium hydroxide were among the contents of the containers. More than 800 of the containers were transporting either plastic or polythene.

“The pollutants of particular concern are nurdles (a small plastic pellet used as a raw material in plastic manufacturing), as they have the potential to spread over vast distances, and recovery of these small plastic pellets can be difficult and protracted,” said ITOPF.

More than 50 containers of material have been recovered along the beaches. At the same time, Sri Lanka’s Central Environmental Authority has instructed the salvage company that the next step should be to recover the containers that fell overboard, in order to stop additional pollution.

“A large portion of the plastic that had washed ashore due to the sinking of the ship has now been collected,” Minister of Environment Mahinda Amaraweera said during the briefing. “We do not know how many more were eaten by fish in the ocean. According to the information I have, plastic pallets piled up on the beach have been collected and stored in containers for destruction”.

A ban remains in effect for all fishing along the coastline in the affected region. The Minister of Environment predicted that the damage to the environment will last for 20 years. “I say that the damage caused by the sinking of the X-Press Pearl cannot be measured in dollars. This caused a great deal of environmental damage and all those involved in this destruction should be legally punished.”

Sri Lanka is continuing to investigate the disaster, with the main focus being on when the chemical leak was first discovered. Port and harbour officials have contended that they were not properly notified by the ship and its agents.

Sri Lanka police continue to review information from the vessel’s recovered VDR device.

2021-built, Singapore-flagged, 31,629 gt X-Press Pearl is owned by Eos Ro Pte Ltd care of manager Sea Consortium Pte Ltd (X-Press Feeders) of Singapore, ISM manager is Eastaway Ship Management Pte. It is entered with London Club on behalf of Killiney Shipping Pte Ltd.