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No oil spill reported, but Sri Lanka braces for worst after X-Press Pearl sinks

by Malaka Rodrigo on 9 June 2021



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- *Days after the ill-fated Singapore-flagged X-Press Pearl cargo ship erupted in flames, attempts to tow the vessel toward deep waters to reduce its impact failed as it began to sink off Sri Lanka's western coast.*
- *The newly commissioned freighter was carrying 300 metric tons of fuel oil in its tanks, but no oil leaks have been reported as of June 8, according to the Sri Lanka Navy.*
- *But there's already fallout from the disaster, with tons of grain-sized plastic pellets from the ship's cargo washing up on beaches along the island's western coast, posing a massive cleanup headache.*
- *Sri Lanka is pursuing compensation from the ship's owner, while experts say the disaster highlights the need for the country to strengthen its capacity to respond to such incidents.*

COLOMBO — The X-Press Pearl cargo ship that caught fire off western Sri Lanka has begun to sink, raising alarms over oil and chemical spills that could have potentially devastating impacts on the marine and coastal ecosystem.

The fire broke out on board the Singapore-flagged freighter on May 21, and took more than a week to get under control. Marine salvage crew who boarded the ship for an inspection after the fire found a breach in the stern and immediately recommended that the ship be towed out to deeper waters to minimize any impact. But the charred and stricken vessel began taking on water quickly; the towing operation had only managed to move it half a kilometer (0.3 miles) before the ship began sinking.

This latest development has sparked fears that the 300 metric tons of fuel oil in the ship's tanks could leak. But in their latest inspection, on June 8, Sri Lankan Navy divers did not find any signs of a leak, according to Indika De Silva, the navy spokesman. De Silva told Mongabay that the ship was holding in a stable position, with its stern lodged against the sandy bottom of the seafloor. Its rear section has hit the sea bed while the front remains above water as the sea there is shallow, and only about 21 meters (69 feet) deep.



Salvage crews began towing the stricken X-Press Pearl toward deeper waters after observing a breach in the ship's stern, but the vessel began sinking almost immediately. Image courtesy of the Sri Lankan Air Force.

No signs of oil spill

The X-Press Pearl is brand new, having been completed in February this year and commissioned in March. And while current indications are that its fuel tanks haven't been breached, the possibility of a leak, especially after the fire that destroyed much of the hull, remains very real.

“The likelihood of an oil spill is high due to any strain or corrosion that may compromise the safety of the fuel tanks,” said Zammath Khaleel, senior program officer of South Asia Cooperative Environment Programme (SACEP), an intergovernmental organization coordinating the oil and chemical pollution contingency plan for South Asia.

“We continuously monitor the ship for any oil leak” said Darshani Lahandapura, chair of Sri Lanka's Marine Environmental Pollution Authority (MEPA). She told Mongabay that authorities were prepared for a possible oil spill, but that the heavy monsoonal rains and strong winds have turned the seas rough and made operations much harder.



Debris and contaminated plastic pellets have carpeted beaches along Sri Lanka's western coast, where cleanup efforts have been hampered by a COVID-19 lockdown. Image courtesy of the Marine Environment Protection Authority.

X-Press Feeders, the ship's owner, said its salvage crew remains with the vessel to monitor its condition and any signs of an oil leak. Andrew Leahy, spokesman for X-Press Feeders, said the company has appointed U.K.-based Oil Spill Response Limited (OSRL) to respond to such an eventuality.

The X-Press Pearl had left the port of Hazira in western India carrying 1,486 containers when the fire started on May 21 off Colombo, Sri Lanka's commercial capital. Among its cargo are 81 containers of hazardous goods, including 25 metric tons of nitric acid — a key ingredient in the production of explosives, and touted as a possible factor for the fire on board.

“Most of the cargo seems to have incinerated by fire,” Leahy said.

SACEP, acting on the request of the Sri Lankan government, has contacted the International Maritime Organization (IMO), which has expertise in handling oil spills. Khaleel said international standards that shipbuilders must comply with are meant to ensure minimal oil leakage during accidents, to give salvage crews time to safely empty the fuel tanks. Given that the X-Press Pearl is newly built, hopes are high that the oil in its tanks can be fully recovered without a spill.



/>The charred cargo ship X-Press Pearl began to sink suddenly, and even though there is no reported oil leak, experts are warning about the possibility of extensive pollution. Image courtesy of the Sri Lankan Air Force.

As a precautionary measure, however, authorities have extended a fishing ban to an area 80 km (50 mi) south of the stricken ship.

On land, Sri Lanka is already dealing with the fallout of what experts are warning could be the worst environmental disaster in the country's history. Tons of grain-sized plastic pellets from the X-Press Pearl's cargo fell overboard during the fire, and have now carpeted beaches along the western coast.

Lahandapura told Mongabay the MEPA is in the process of pursuing compensation from the ship's owners for both the firefighting costs and the environmental damage.

The Sri Lankan Police have also obtained a court order preventing captain of the ship and his engineering crew from leaving the country. The rest of the 25 crew members are in quarantine facilities, after one of them injured during the evacuation tested positive for COVID-19.

In a statement, X-Press Feeders pledged its support for the ongoing investigation into the incident.

Transparent investigation

Rohan Masakorala, chief executive of the Colombo-based Shippers Academy, called for a transparent and efficient investigation to prevent similar incidents in the future. He told Mongabay it's important to identify whether there were communication gaps and

whether parties responded to the distress call.

It took emergency assistance from the Indian Coast Guard, which sent two firefighting vessels, before Sri Lanka could put out the fire. If Sri Lanka intends to develop itself as a regional maritime hub, the country needs to develop domestic capabilities to respond to situations such as this one, Masakorala said.

Sri Lanka lies in a busy shipping lane, midway between the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Malacca. With increased shipping traffic, the country must develop the capacity to respond promptly to distress calls, Masakorala said, warning that a delay of an hour or two could be decisive in firefighting efforts.

Banner image of the charred cargo ship X-Press Pearl, courtesy of the Sri Lankan Air Force.

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