

UNITED NATIONS



জাতিসংঘ

জাতিসংঘ আবাসিক সমন্বয়কারীর কার্যালয় - বাংলাদেশ
OFFICE OF THE UNITED NATIONS RESIDENT COORDINATOR IN BANGLADESH

BRIEFING

31 December 2014

SUNDARBAN OIL SPILL ASSESSMENT
Joint United Nations / Government of Bangladesh Mission

18-31 December, 2014

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The incident in the Shela river represents a **serious oil spill accident in a wildlife sanctuary and world heritage site treasured for its unique biodiversity.**

On December 9, an oil tanker accident in the Sundarbans of Bangladesh led to the release of approximately 350,000 litres of heavy fuel oil into the river and mangrove ecosystem. The responsible shipping company estimated that 68,000 litres had been recovered, based on payment records to local communities. The response to the accident was led by the Forest Department of the Ministry of Environment and Forests with the help of local communities. Concern about the potential impacts of the oil to the ecosystem and the communities that depend on it for their livelihoods, led the Government of Bangladesh on 15 December 2014 to request the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for technical assistance in assessing the impacts and supporting the response.

A Joint United Nations / Government of Bangladesh Sundarbans Oil Spill Response mission was subsequently formed, with the inclusion of 25 experts and officials from Government agencies, universities, the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination mechanism, UNDP, USAID, European Union Civil Protection Mechanism, France and the Wildlife Conservation Society. The objective of the mission was to strengthen the Government's efforts in containing and cleaning up the oil spillage, as well as to provide support to assessing the situation and developing an action plan for a phased response and recovery. The team spent six days (22 – 27 December) in the affected area where site observations, interviews, aerial photography, sampling and other assessment techniques were used to evaluate the situation and develop recommendations.

Based on the mission's observation, there is limited immediate environmental impact to the mangrove and aquatic ecosystems. The commendable effort by local communities and the Government of Bangladesh, particularly the Forest Department, as well as timely tidal variations and the decision to ban tanker traffic in



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the river, minimized the penetration of oil into the ecosystem. The main shorelines 40 km up- and downstream of the site shows varying degree of pollution. No visible impact on the mangrove forest floor due to the accident has been observed, and the initial acute impacts to wildlife from this spill appear to be limited in scope. When it comes to impact, the rapid assessment recommends further monitoring to conclusively determine the effect of the residual oil in the aquatic environment and its impacts on fisheries and livelihoods.

Bangladesh has a strong disaster management system and good preparedness for natural hazards. However, environmental emergencies like oil spills and industrial accidents represent a particular type of emergency and demand a specific approach. Moving forward, existing knowledge and solid disaster management experience can be used to strengthen the country's preparedness for technological disasters. Training, equipment and experience will improve the response to environmental emergencies and minimize the impacts on local communities and ecosystems.

From an environmental perspective, traffic through the valued and biodiverse Sundarbans World Heritage Site should be avoided. While a number of factors limited the impact of the spill, the shipping of oil through a sensitive environment presents a serious risk to both the environment and the communities that depend on it for their livelihoods – appropriate safeguards and mitigation measures need to be put in place before opening the route to traffic.

For background use:

1. The United Nations Sundarbans Oil Spill Response mission, comprised of multi-disciplinary experts from seven different countries including Bangladesh included the following representatives:

1. National Specialists:

- **GoB officials:** Officials from Ministry of Environment, Forest Department and Bangladesh Forest Research Institute and Department of Environment.
- **Bangladeshi institutions and NGOs:** Marine Science Institute of Chittagong University; Khulna University; University of Dhaka and Wildlife Conservation Society.

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2. International experts:

- **France:** two experts from Centre of Documentation, Research and Experimentation on Accidental Water Pollution (CEDRE).
- **USA:** One expert from US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)'s Office of Response and Restoration and one from University of California, Davis; One expert from US Coast Guard.
- **Finland:** Team leader through the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) / United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)
- **Sweden:** One Disaster Management Expert through the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC)
- **Japan:** One Logistics coordinator through the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC)
- **Canada:** One oil spill expert (UNDP Consultant)
- **UNDP:** Two experts on disaster management and environment and natural resource management.

The mission timing is 18 December – 4 January.

The initial findings will be presented to the Government on 31 January, with a first report ready by early January. The finalized report is scheduled to be published on 15 January

